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THE
INEVITABLE
LAW

F. E.
PENNY

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THE INEVITABLE LAW

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BY
F. E. PENNY
AUTHOR OF
"CASTE AND CREED," "DILYS," "THE SANYASI,"
"THE TEA-PLANTER," ETC.



LONDON
CHATTO & WINDUS
1908

PRINTED BY
WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
LONDON AND BECCLES.

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P3652

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THE INEVITABLE LAW

CHAPTER I

A COLLISION

THE bleakness of the month of May, which England rarely escapes, was passing. The ice saints, as the French aptly term them, had had their day and were gone. With their departure the cold north-east wind died down, and with the wind went the last remnant of wintry weather. Through the blue haze the sun's rays penetrated with vivifying warmth, encouraging the tender foliage of the woods to further effort.

Full to the top of its banks flowed the Thames; broad streaks of light gleamed where the dying wind caught its surface in fitful eddies. Swallows, lately arrived, darted above the water in quest of the insect life summoned forth by the sun. In the Taplow and Cliveden woods the song-birds were pouring forth a noisy chorus; and across the meadows the vagabond cuckoo sent his voice with persistent reiteration.

It was too early for the gay crowd of summer visitors to be on the water. The boathouses still sheltered the gay craft that would by-and-by fill the waterway with colour and life. The presence of a few boats on the wharves indicated the fact that in spite of the hailstorms and cold blasts of May, a few faithful lovers of the Thames had renewed their close friendship with the most beautiful river of England.

Borne on the slow, powerful stream, a boat floated down towards Boulter's Lock. The rowers rested on their sculls whilst sparkling dewdrops trickled over the gilt monograms on

the blades. In the stern sat a girl, her face turned towards the meadows, her ear eager to catch the sound of the cuckoo. As the boat moved with the current she trailed her hand in the river, the rudder lines lying untouched at her feet.

"The water is cold, Ranee, too cold to dabble in at present," remarked the man who rowed stroke. His voice was peculiarly musical, and he spoke with a slight foreign accent, rendering the first syllable of "Ranee" long.

"No," she replied, with protest, adding, on second thoughts, "Yes, it is chilly, but not too cold. It is my way of enjoying it. I cannot hear the river singing as I hear the cuckoo, so I must touch it. Have you cuckoos in India, Rama Rajah?"

"Plenty, but none that sing like yours," answered the Indian.

His companion of the sculls, a fellow countryman, laughed as he added—

"Our cuckoos are not to be named in the same breath as yours. We have one which would drive you mad with its everlasting cry of 'Who-are-you? Who-are-you?' You would hate it, Miss Loree."

Desika Budra's voice contrasted strongly with that of the first speaker. He uttered the words quickly, clipping them with a tightened throat, so that they fell with a sharp incision on the ear, clearly enough, but with a strong foreign accent. He pulled a stroke or two to keep the boat's head straight. They were nearing the lock which was embowered in the delicate green of the willows, and had not yet shaken off its mantle of winter quietude.

Dolores Avondean, called Loree by her father and Ranee by Rama Rajah, shook her head.

"I am quite sure that I could never hate any bird."

"Ah, you have never heard the screaming kite and the hoarse verandah crow of our country," rejoined Desika, unconvinced.

"We have crows and hawks in England. Surely I can hear both at this very moment in the woods of Taplow Court."

Her beautiful sightless blue eyes turned towards the spot, although nothing but the eternal darkness of her life met her vision.

"You are right, Ranee. Some kestrels are circling over the trees, and the rooks are scolding at them," said Rama Rajah, shading his eyes and gazing into the pale sky. "You have a wonderful sense of hearing."

Her face flushed at the compliment as she admitted its truth.

"I know; my brain seems focussed in my ears and I hear a great deal more than those who have the use of their eyes. I can almost hear your thoughts."

There was a slight, a very slight, accent on the pronoun.

"Can you hear mine, Miss Loree?" asked Desika.

"I don't know; I am not sure;" she answered, with hesitation, her sensitive mind shrinking from drawing any invidious distinction. "Just at this moment I can hear voices in the lock. The sun has brought out others besides ourselves upon the river."

"Pull, Desika, so that we may pass through the gate as it opens."

The boat glided ahead as the two young men dipped their sculls, Desika doing the steering. As they approached the lock the gate swung open and a motor-launch shot out. Too late the lock-keeper uttered his warning. Desika shipped his sculls, seized a boat-hook, and did his best to avoid a collision. But though he lessened the shock, he could not entirely prevent it from taking place, and the stern of the skiff grated along the side of the motor.

A sharp exclamation from Dolores startled her companions as well as the occupants of the launch. She drew up the hand that she had trailed in the water. The white skin was broken on the back of it, and a little stream of crimson ran down her fingers.

"Ranee, you are hurt!" cried Rama Rajah, as he leaned forward and staunched the blood with his handkerchief.

The two men in the motor stopped their engine and

poured forth apologies to which Desika listened with flashing eye.

"It was impossible to see you or even to guess that you were there," said one of the strangers, by way of excuse.

"That is no reason, sir, why you should run us down," retorted Desika, in his strident voice.

"At any rate your inexperience had something to do with causing the accident," responded the other, with irritation.

"—— which we deeply regret," added the elder man.

He was anxiously regarding Miss Avondean as she leaned towards Rama Rajah, resting the uninjured hand on the arm of the Hindu, who was binding up the wound.

"Regrets will not staunch blood nor will pity heal a wound," asserted Desika, loftily.

"Say no more; Ranee will not like it," said Rama Rajah, who had had many years more of English experience than Desika.

"How was it, may I ask, that the lady did not guard herself by withdrawing her hand? Even if she were not steering, she might have seen that a collision was likely to occur."

Rama Rajah lifted his head as he knotted the handkerchief round the wrist.

"Miss Avondean is blind," he said simply.

There was dignity as well as courtesy in his manner, the natural instinctive dignity which belongs to the higher castes in India and is their heritage. Both the men in the launch recognized it, and the subtle difference it made between the two Orientals.

"I beg your pardon; I understand now how it all happened. I hope the lady is not much hurt," said Captain Ravellion, promptly addressing himself to Rama Rajah, with a change of manner.

"Why! it is Dolores Avondean!" cried the older man. "You remember me, don't you?"

She raised her head to listen, and her eyes seemed to seek those of the speaker. As he gazed into their azure depths he

noted the defect which he remembered of old. Her face still wore an expression of pain, but a smile curved her lips as memory came to her assistance.

"I remember your voice! You were one of father's pupils, seven, eight,— or was it nine years ago? You are Ambrose Newent." She paused, and then added, with a question in her tone, "from India?"

"Home on leave, after eight years' grind. Yes, Miss Avondean, you are right, though how you recognized me I am at a loss to guess."

"It is my ears that help me. Having no eyes they have to do double duty."

"How is it that we find you on the Thames? Your father was living at Bath when I was with him; and you had your hair down your back. It must be ten years since he helped me into the Indian Civil Service; not nine."

As they conversed, the two rowers sat silent, Desika steadying the boat with the boat-hook against the launch, whilst Captain Ravellion, having turned away as though the conversation had no interest for him, idly watched the flight of a white butterfly over a bunch of budding comfrey on the bank.

"We have left Bath and have settled in Maidenhead. My father still takes pupils. These are two of them. Rama Rajah has passed for the Indian Civil Service and is to go out to your Presidency this autumn."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the civilian, with a suddenly awakened interest in her companions.

He scrutinized closely the features of the man who had bound up the injured hand with such tenderness and care.

"May I ask to what family you belong?" he said, addressing Rama Rajah for the first time.

"I am the son of Doraswamy Pillai, of Tinnevelly. My father has a large estate there."

"I know him, one of the old-fashioned landowners, with a large circle of relations living under his roof. It was always a matter of surprise to me that he permitted his son to cross the water."

Rama Rajah smiled as he answered. "It was the prize that was to be gained. My family have an ambition. They desire to see me filling the post of Assistant Collector at Tinnevelly. I have already applied for the appointment."

Newent grew serious. "It is a post you are not likely to obtain. Government cannot consider private interests. It would go against you rather than in your favour to have it known that you wished to live among your own people."

"How very unfair!" cried Dolores.

Ambrose Newent laughed as he upheld the action of his superiors. Turning to Desika, he asked if he too were destined for the same service. The young man showed a fine set of white teeth as he answered for himself.

"I am, as the baboo says, a 'failed civilian,' and being at the age limit, have no other chance. I am therefore returning with my friend, Rama Rajah, Pillai, a sadder and a wiser man."

His foreign accent and mocking tone grated on the fastidious ear of Captain Ravellion, who bent over the motor engine as though to set it in motion.

"We must not detain you," said Newent, noting the movement of his companion. "Were you intending to pass through the lock?"

Dolores replied instantly. "I think I would rather turn back and give up going any further. Would you mind, Rama Rajah?"

"Not in the least, Ranee. If your hand is still hurting you we had better return."

"May we give you a tow?" asked Newent, without consulting his companion.

Ravellion's brow contracted. He also knew India and had his prejudices. In his opinion the native was not to be encouraged either in his own country or in England. The sight of the English girl with the Orientals irritated him. To Rama Rajah he might have taken no exception; but Desika he classed as a blatant baboo, a man to be snubbed and kept in his place. The offer was accepted, for the stream was

strong to pull against, and it was pleasanter to be drawn smoothly through the water without exertion than to strain at the sculls, healthy exercise though it might be. In a silence that might easily have been construed into protest, Ravellion passed out a rope to Desika. Miss Avondean leaned back in her seat astern, the injured hand resting on her lap ; Desika remained in the bows ; Rama Rajah placed himself by her side and took the rudder ropes in his hand. The cheeks which had been paler than usual since the accident, flushed as he dropped into his seat. His elbow touched hers lightly as he handled the ropes.

Newent, watching the change of position before setting the engine in motion, noted the mounting colour with a sudden resentment that took him by surprise.

At no great distance from the lock was a boathouse and a landing-stage built in a creek. Here the owner of the skiff, Rama Rajah, asked to be cast adrift.

“Mr. Newent, won’t you come up to the house and have some tea? Father will be delighted to see you,” inquired Dolores.

The elder man glanced at his companion. “Do you mind sparing half an hour? I should much like to meet my old tutor again.”

But it was not of Mr. Avondean that Newent was thinking. Something undefined impelled him to seek further speech with the girl he had known as a child, a girl to whom womanhood had come, in spite of her infirmity, with all the romance that attends its advent in a highly-strung sensitive human being.

They landed, and again Newent found himself watching with mixed feelings the careful attention given to Dolores by Rama Rajah as she stepped out of the boat, and the complete reliance she placed upon her guide. Newent offered his assistance and would have put the Hindu aside with small ceremony had she permitted it. But his offers were rejected, and her hand was laid upon the arm of the other, with a decision that was final. The party walked through the

buttercups and cuckoo-flowers towards a house that stood near the Cookham road.

They found Mr. Avondean in his garden among his rose trees. With glasses on his nose and gloves upon his hands he was searching the tender shoots for preying insect life, intent on dealing death and destruction to all the enemies of his beloved roses. He greeted the unexpected guests warmly, and led the way into the drawing-room through the large French window that opened on the lawn. Tea was brought, and whilst they drank it the old tutor learned the details of the meeting on the river. Dolores, who had disappeared to have her hand seen to, rejoined them as the maid entered with the tray.

"I hope the poor little hand has not suffered much," said Newent, taking a chair by her side.

"Not so much as I thought at first. I was more frightened than hurt," she replied smiling.

He studied the face that was turned towards him. The pretty child had become a beautiful woman. Nature, in distress at having withheld one of her gifts, had been lavish with all the rest, and by way of compensation had given her a perfect mouth, the clearest of complexions, and shell-like ears that caught every sound, every inflection of the voice.

Mr. Avondean poured out the tea. Captain Ravellion having seated himself near his host was engaging more than half his attention by recounting certain impending changes that were to take place in the Indian army, information of absorbing interest to the tutor who spent his life in preparing pupils for examinations. Rama Rajah quietly assisted, handing the cups round to Newent and Dolores.

The Anglo-Indian watched with mixed feelings the care with which the Hindu guided the hand of the girl to her cup and plate. Just now she was more helpless than usual; but this did not distress her. On the contrary, she accepted the ministrations with pleasure, and rewarded her knight of the tea-table with murmurs of gratitude, uttered between the sentences of the conversation she was carrying on with

Newent. More than once Rama Rajah's fingers closed over hers as he guided them to the handle of her cup or the cake upon her plate. Suddenly a thought stabbed the brain of the observant civilian, giving birth to a suspicion that he strove in vain to cast out.

"How is your hand, Ranee?" asked the Hindu as he put down her empty cup.

"Much better."

He took her fingers in his and lifted the injured member, examining the bandages to see if they were displaced.

"It will soon be well. You know I told you that you ought not to dabble in the water."

His words were masterful, but his voice grew tender as he uttered his reproaches. She caught the inflexion. It was only the tenderness that the strong feel for the weak, but Newent gathered yet another item of knowledge as he listened.

"How long have you been with my old tutor, Rama Rajah?" he asked.

"I came to England when I was a boy, ten years ago."

"It was a few months after you left," added Dolores.

"Have you lived with Mr. Avondean ever since?"

"His house has always been my home. I have been to Harrow, and through the usual course of cramming for the Indian Civil Service, but it has come to an end now, worse luck! and I am to go out to India in September."

"You have not seen your people since you left the East?"

"No; but of course I have corresponded with them. The post does great things for us in the way of bridging distances and keeping the hearts of the absent warm."

There was a short space of silence. Desika, having finished tea and finding it impossible to take a part in the discussion that was going on between Captain Ravellion and the old tutor, rose from his seat near the tea-table and strolled off to the smoking-room, where he found the three young men who were his fellow pupils. They had had a separate tea-tray,

and were just lighting cigarettes. Mr. Avondean rose to his feet.

"If you will come into my study a moment I will show you what I mean. With all due deference to your opinion, I feel sure that I am right on that point."

Captain Ravellion followed him out, and Newent was left with Dolores and Rama Rajah. The latter said—

"The post will have to bridge the distance for Miss Avondean and myself when I am gone. She has been very good to me ever since I sheltered myself beneath her wing on my arrival, a shy, awkward boy, ignorant of all English manners. I owe her more than I can tell you, Mr. Newent. She has been a true friend."

The flexible voice thrilled with the warm emotion that came so readily to the Oriental. Dolores made no comment, but her hand was laid for a moment upon the arm of the speaker, and the touch was more eloquent than speech.

"Such a friendship would be impossible in your own country," observed Newent, his eyes bent upon his old tutor's daughter.

"Why should it be impossible?" she asked, with a challenge in her tone.

"Existing conditions of society among the Hindus would not permit of friendly intercourse between two young people. I doubt if it would be possible even between relatives, members of the same caste, the same family. You are a Vellalan, are you not, Rama Rajah?"

"I am a Vellalan," replied the Hindu, not without some pride.

"One of the higher castes of South India," added Newent, with knowledge.

"Are you not a Brahmin?" asked Dolores. "I thought all native gentlemen were Brahmins."

They both laughed, and the Englishman took upon himself to explain.

"No, he cannot claim to be one of the twice-born."

"Is Desika of the same caste?"

"He is a Shanar."

"I am afraid I am very ignorant. Is he of higher or lower caste than you, Rama Rajah?"

"We Vellalans consider the Shanars far below us. In South India we come next to the Brahmins," he replied.

"Let me try and explain," said Newent. "The Hindus of India were formerly divided into four groups, the Brahmin or priestly caste claiming to take precedence of all others."

"And holding all men not of their caste in contempt," added Rama Rajah, his dark eyes flashing with an indignation that was the result of Western education.

"The second group is the Kshattriya or soldier caste," continued Newent. "The third is the Vaisaya or trader; and the fourth is the Sudra, to which belong most of the Hindus of South India. The Sudras are divided and subdivided, and in the front rank stands the Vellala, who, in the absence of the Kshattriya and the Vaisaya in the South, ranks next to the Brahmin. Below the Sudra comes the Pariah, literally the 'out-caste,' the man who has no caste. But nowadays the Pariahs have their divisions and distinctions, calling themselves this caste and that caste according to their employments; and some of them would fain have us believe that they belong to the Sudras, whilst the Sudras would like to be classed as Kshattriyas and Vaisayas."

"Like the Shanars, for instance," remarked Rama Rajah, smiling as his thoughts flew to his friend Desika, whose father, the wealthy tobacco merchant, claimed the title of "Nadan," and liked to be called "Sandror," the excellent, in spite of his liberal views and profession of indifference on the question of caste.

"After all, it appears to me to be nothing but a matter of social distinction," remarked Dolores.

"It is more than that. Social distinction is only one of its aspects. There is the economic side as well, the teaching of the father's trade to the son, which forms a kind of trades' union; and there is the religious side, a most important part of caste, which is at the bottom of all disputes and antagonism.

Formerly there was a political aspect, but that has now disappeared. Law and order prevail throughout the land, and there is nothing left but religious differences to foment quarrels and prevent cohesion. But I am afraid this is not very interesting to you, Dolores."

"Indeed, it is more interesting than I can say," she assured him. "Everything that concerns Rama Rajah attracts me ; and I have had a great desire to go to India and see his country."

She spoke with warm enthusiasm ; and as Newent's eyes dwelt upon her features, an apprehension, a little less formless and vague than before, once more filled his mind. She took his silence to mean something else, and continued quickly—

"Ah, I know what you are thinking of ! I have spoken of seeing India. It is my way of talking. To understand is to see, is it not, Rajah ? I make use of other people's eyes, Mr. Newent. To-day I saw the kestrels and the rooks flying above the Taplow woods, and the golden buttercups in the meadows, the blue and white lights upon the water, the beautiful green of the foliage. I saw them with Rama Rajah's eyes, and some day I will see India with his eyes."

Again she extended the uninjured hand which was taken by the Hindu in simple affection and without a shadow of embarrassment. As Newent noted the action, he was disquieted. The suspicion that had pierced him became knowledge, and he stirred uneasily as he realized what had happened. He glanced at the Hindu. The refined features were in absolute repose. There was no reflexion of the enthusiasm and emotion, no glimmer of the fire that lighted up the whole being of the blind girl ; nor any sign that he read what was so plain to Newent. Rama Rajah's manner, gentle and considerate to tenderness, was innocent of self-consciousness. The natural dignity inherited by the better castes of India showed itself in the ease with which he accepted her tribute of affection. It was plainly evident that to him it was only the natural warm-heartedness of a friend, and that he had no suspicion of the truth.

" You are the eldest son of your family, are you not ? "

" I am the only son, the only child. My brother and two sisters were carried off by cholera when they were quite young."

Newent glanced at the listening figure by his side and came to a sudden determination. It might be cruel, but he had no time to pick and choose his opportunity, and the dream of Dolores must at all cost be shattered.

" May I ask, Rama Rajah, if you are married ? "

The reply came readily and without hesitation. " Certainly I am. The ceremony was performed when I was eight years old. The little girl was two years younger than myself. She is still with her parents."

" The ceremonies will be concluded, I suppose, as soon as you arrive in India ? "

" The marriage is to be completed directly I arrive, so that my wife may accompany me to my station."

" Ah ! " cried Newent, turning to Dolores, whose cheek had suddenly paled. " I am afraid, Miss Avondean, that your hand is painful. Come out into the fresh air of the garden. I have kept you talking here too long."

CHAPTER II

MARRIED OR SINGLE

THE colour had indeed fled from her cheeks, and a strange expression of pain clouded the blue eyes. But she quickly recovered her self-possession and rose from her seat, saying—

“How foolish of me! It was the shock—the—the unexpected touch of the launch upon my hand. I will go into the garden, Mr. Newent; the fresh air will revive me.”

She put out her hand which was instantly taken by Rama Rajah. She recognized the touch and withdrew it swiftly.

“No, Rajah; you have wasted quite enough time upon me for to-day. You may go to the smoking-room for the cigarette you love after tea.”

“Very well, Ranee,” he replied complacently. “Don’t get into any more mischief.”

Newent followed Dolores as she stepped out of the window on to the lawn. The grass had been cut, and there was a sweet scent of shorn turf in the air. The sun was still bright, and the landscape lay under a soft haze that suggested the coming of summer warmth. The beauty of the scene brought a pang of regret to the heart of the Anglo-Indian. His misguided boat had been the cause of physical pain to the helpless woman at his side; and now his tongue had wrought the same thing mentally, striking a note of suffering which could not be as easily healed as the wound on the hand. He felt like some rude boy who had hurled stones into a glassy pool and ruthlessly broken up the beautiful mirror.

Yet regret it as he might, his conscience did not blame him. It was absolutely necessary to lift the curtain and show

her what was behind ; and the duty of doing so devolved upon him because he alone knew exactly how matters stood. Whether the possibility of a union between herself and her father's pupil had ever entered her mind he could not guess. The line that divides indefinite desire from definite intention is invisible ; it is passed unconsciously ; and whilst it is comparatively easy to subdue a shadowy hope, it is not a light matter to destroy the ardent sacrificing passion which some women cast at the feet of their beloved heroes. However far advanced the mischief was, he came to the conclusion that the sooner she was brought face to face with her inmost soul the better.

They paced the lawn together towards a group of elm-trees that stood upon the boundary between the garden and the meadows. Here were seats and a rustic table, suggestive of summer tea in cool deep shade. Dolores, with the unerring instinct of the blind, led her companion to the chairs. As he seated himself, Newent observed—

“ You are as independent as ever, and find your way about unassisted.”

“ I am more able to stand alone than people imagine,” she replied quickly, and in a tone that rang with a faint note of self-assertion.

“ At any rate you have a careful knight in Rama Rajah.”

“ He has been very good to me ever since he entered our house. He is like a brother, and I cannot think of him as a foreigner or stranger.”

“ Yet he belongs to another nation and another continent.”

“ He speaks like an Englishman, and behaves like an Englishman,” she declared warmly.

“ He is not a Christian.”

“ True, but he goes to church with me. When you are talking with him, surely you find it difficult to remember his oriental birth. Now with Desika it is quite different. His voice, his sentiments, his accent, all show his Eastern origin.”

“ Your friend certainly has a wonderful voice, especially for an Asiatic. As a rule they talk like Desika, with a strident nasal intonation. It is partly due to their *alfresco* life and the

constant necessity of having to raise their voices in the open air."

Dolores laughed as her thoughts flew back to earlier days.

"I remember when Rama Rajah first arrived he squeaked at us with a shrill piping treble. But I took upon myself the task of correcting him, and when his voice broke he learned to modulate it to what you hear it is now. I love his voice. It always gives me pleasure to listen to it. There is something soothing in it, something that awakes my sympathies and makes me feel in touch with the soul of the speaker. Surely the charm reaches your ear as well as mine!"

He bent his head in silent acquiescence, forgetting that she could not see.

"You cannot deny that he has that charm," she continued with insistence.

"I grant it."

"And that consequently, owing to his Western training, it is not a difficult matter to forget his birth and his nationality."

"Forgive me if I suggest something; you overlook the fact that I possess the sight which has been denied to you. I shrink from alluding to it, but I am impelled to speak plainly, since you press me."

"Is he—is he so different in appearance from an Englishman?" she asked, with sudden apprehension.

"It is not so much the form and features that mark the Asiatic as his colour. His skin is of a tint that cannot be disguised."

"And Rama Rajah?"

"He is as brown as you are white, as dark as you are fair."

Newent did not hesitate to make the distinction personal. His tongue was as steady as the hand of the surgeon who holds the operating knife. He glanced at her and noted that he had not spoken without effect. Her breath came quickly, and it was evident that she controlled herself by an effort. For a short space there was silence, which she broke by suddenly demanding—

"What is the colour of your eyes?"

He was slightly taken aback by her divergence from the Hindu to himself, not perceiving the drift of her inquiry.

"They are brown, dark brown; some people call them black," he answered, wondering what it had to do with the topic of their conversation.

"Mine, I am told, are blue. Yours are dark, very dark; mine are fair. But no one ventures to draw a distinction between us. You say that his complexion is dark and mine is fair. Is there so much difference between the complexion and the eyes that a contrast in one is of no consequence whilst in the other it is of vital importance? If this is so, I cannot understand it."

"You cannot understand without the assistance of sight."

"If it is a difference which only meets the eye it is not worth considering," she cried impetuously.

For a moment he was at a loss to answer her. The task of making the blind see that which was not apparent to the other senses was not an easy one. She pursued her conviction with an under-current of indignation ringing in her words.

"Something more than the eye is needed to prove the existence of a fundamental difference between two people, two nations. Between Rama Rajah and myself I can feel no difference of race, no difference of thought, no difference of taste. The barrier you would raise is created solely by the eye, the fastidious eye that chooses to think a dark complexion ugly. I may consider myself blessed instead of being cursed in having been denied the possession of such an unjust tyrant as the physical eye."

She spoke with strong emotion and he was distressed at the storm which he had evoked.

"I do not wish to infer that Rama Rajah is not handsome. He has all the good looks of his race, refined and regular features, a supple, well-knit figure and a graceful, dignified bearing. Were he British-born he would be a distinguished-looking man. But being a native of Southern India he has a dark skin and that makes all the difference."

"Dark! What does that mean? Is not my whole world

dark? Was I not born to darkness? To me the cuckoo sings in darkness, the river flows, the flowers bloom in darkness. I have learned to love my world of darkness, for I know no other. And if Rama Rajah, the friend of my life, is dark, that fact in itself should bring him into my world and draw him closer to me. Is not my whole life coloured as you say he is coloured?"

The passionate appeal moved him strangely and he was conscious that his effort to open the eyes of her mind was not meeting with success. He had dealt a deathblow to an unborn hope, but he had not succeeded in dispelling the ideal in which that hope had had its origin. He fell back lamely on generalities with an attempt to drop the personal character of the discussion. The disclosure of Rama Rajah's marriage was sufficient in itself to put an end to romantic dreams of any future tie that should be closer than that of mere friendship.

"The intimacy of the East with the West," he concluded, "has always proved a difficulty, an impossibility, I might say. Perhaps you would understand the difference better if you visited India."

She swept his generalizing aside. The matter under discussion was the relationship between herself and her friend.

"I am considering the difference between Rama Rajah and myself," she persisted.

He fell in with her desire, and responded at once: "Very well, then; to begin with, let us take the conditions of his domestic life and yours. You live with your widowed father, the mistress of his house—an impossible position for any unmarried woman in India. Your home is like a tree with a single stem, compact and complete. His home is composed of many stems and branches like the banyan tree. It is a complex community, many of the male members standing on separate stems but at the same time being part of the tree."

"There is surely a head to the family."

"His father is the recognized head of the family, but that does not mean that he is the ruler of the household. The dominating influence in the house of a Hindu is usually that

of an elderly female who has succeeded to her position by a chain of circumstances which includes the death of her seniors. It may be in Rama Rajah's case his mother, or grandmother, if she is still alive, or it may be an aunt."

"Has not the father of the family something to say in the domestic government?"

"There is a proverb in India to the effect that a man is a lion abroad but only a jackal in the bosom of his family. He may talk as he pleases. Like the jackal, he may go as far as to howl his protests. But he is of little account, and the sceptre is in the hand of the particular old woman who happens to be the ruling spirit of the zenana. These women make the marriages of the boys, intrigue for husbands for the girls, arrange pilgrimages to temples and welcome the guru, or domestic chaplain of the family, when he pays them his periodical visit. You will find, if you care to inquire, that it was some such influential relative who brought about the marriage of your friend and his despatch to England to be educated, which resulted in his entry into the Indian Civil Service."

"It is strange to think of him as a married man." She paused, and then added, with a swift impatience, "So ridiculous! so impossible!"

"As a married Englishman," he amended, laying stress upon the word English. "Being a Hindu of good caste, and belonging to a family in good circumstances, I could not imagine him otherwise than as the husband of some child-wife. I once went into a boys' school in India and I had the curiosity to ask if any of the boys were married. There were twenty-three in the class and their ages ranged from eight to eleven years. The master immediately requested those boys who were married to hold up their hands. There were only four who stood motionless. Those who owned to matrimony displayed no sign of self-consciousness. The show of hands might have been for vaccination or measles."

"It is difficult to imagine such a condition of things."

"Therein lies the difference between the races. The

mere fact of your friend Rama Rajah having been married for the last dozen or so years ought to teach you something."

The emotion had died away, and she had fallen into a contemplative mood. She was endeavouring to picture her friend as a married man. The vision of him playing the part of husband to some child absolutely refused to present itself.

"What do you suppose his wife is like?" she asked.

"She is no doubt a pleasant-mannered girl, as Hindu maids are, with shy, beautiful eyes and a soft skin, still living under her parent's roof. She will have grown out of the child by this time, and is probably waiting with some impatience for the return of her husband."

"There will be some ceremonies, I presume?"

"The feasting of Brahmin beggars, the reception of congratulatory visits, the exchange of presents, and possibly some religious ceremony."

"It is more correct from our point of view to say that Rama Rajah is engaged, betrothed," she suggested.

"It is more than a betrothal. The marriage ceremony has been performed, and if Rama Rajah died to-morrow his girl-wife would become a widow," he declared decisively. "The honeymoon is the next act in the domestic drama. It will be spent in the bosom of his family under the jealous eye of the old lady who rules the household, and woe betide the bride if she does not conduct herself in the accepted manner!"

"How strange! I cannot realize it."

"You must realize it," he said emphatically. "It is only in the contemplation of these curious domestic differences that you can arrive at a just appreciation of the wide gulf that lies between the two races and which separates you from Rama Rajah. You ought to pay India a visit, Dolores. You would then be able to grasp the various aspects of the question. There is his religion, for instance, another stumbling-block which must be seen in India itself to be understood."

"He goes to church with me every Sunday, and is at heart a Christian, I am sure. He joins in the hymns and also in

the responses. He says that we worship the same God but under different forms."

"I know the familiar theory. But will he consent to become a Christian?"

"No; he is firm on that point. As far as he is concerned himself, he is quite ready to change; but he is bound to consider the prejudices of his family——"

"Of the old woman who rules it," interpolated Newent.

"And the family wishes him to make no change until he returns, which, after all, is only natural."

"Exactly so; and when he is under the old influence, he will pursue the old way, going to the temple and taking his part in the poojah as his forefathers have done for centuries before him."

She rose up in Rama Rajah's defence at once.

"If he finds that he cannot escape going to the temple with his people, he will go; but he will not like it."

"Possibly," conceded Newent, although he did not agree. He had no wish to hurt her feelings, and he felt also that anything he said which might seem depreciatory of Rama Rajah would do more harm than good. "But, however much he may dislike it, he will be there; and no one will ask him for any other profession of his faith except what is implied by his presence. No one will want to know what he thinks of it all, but his presence will proclaim him an orthodox Hindu and satisfy any who may choose to doubt his orthodoxy."

At that moment Ravellion and Mr. Avondean appeared at the open window through which they passed. Their discussion had lost none of its zest, and the quick ear of Dolores caught the sound of their voices.

"I hear my father," she said, with a return of her customary cheerfulness. Then, leaning towards him, she spoke in a low, earnest tone. "Mr. Newent, I have been more interested in all you have told me than you can understand. Some of it has been hard to believe because it has upset one or two of my most cherished beliefs. I shall have to remake and reform my opinions to a certain extent. I am going to ask you a

favour, a great favour. Will you befriend Rama Rajah when he returns to his family and begins his new work?"

"I will indeed, as much for his sake as for yours, if the opportunity occurs."

As the two men approached, Newent rose to his feet with a smile.

"It is a great pleasure to meet you again, sir," he said.

"Yes, Newent, and I am always delighted to see my old boys whenever they will take the trouble to look me up. I have not yet had a moment to ask you after your own welfare."

"That is soon told. I am in excellent health, and I like my work. I have come home to England to be married, and I shall be going back to India in the autumn. At some future time you must allow Dolores to pay us a visit. Your Indian pupils have roused her interest in their country."

"That is Rama Rajah," replied her father at once. "He is unlike any other Indian who has been under my charge. There is something different about him—I don't know what it is—something that draws one to him. We shall miss him more than a little when he goes, shall we not, Loree?"

"Yes, father; I shall lose a very dear friend," she answered simply.

"Come to India and renew your friendship with him," proposed Newent.

A little later they took their departure, and as Newent held her hand for a few seconds his eyes rested on the beautiful face of the blind girl with a strange expression of pity. He was about to marry the woman of his choice. Perhaps his own happiness made him peculiarly sympathetic with others not so fortunate as himself.

CHAPTER III

A PARTING

THE summer slipped away. The cuckoo winged his flight to other countries, the golden sheen on the meadows faded, the pale green of the woods darkened to a uniform tint before bursting into the gorgeous orange and yellow of autumn, and the harvest moon shed its broad mellow light over the Thames valley.

Rama Rajah took his last row upon the river that he had learned to love so well. In the stern of the boat, the rudder lines about her feet, one hand upon her lap, and the other trailing in the warm limpid water, sat Dolores. Desika sculled in the bows, pulling fitfully, his thoughts far away in the future. He was to be the companion of his fellow-countryman on the voyage out.

"We shall not have much of this sort of thing when we get home," he remarked, breaking a silence that had fallen on the little party.

"Is there no boating in India?" asked Dolores.

"There is none like this, Ranee. There can never be any more like this for me," replied Rama Rajah, with sudden warmth.

"Eh! Rama! what would our people think of us if we took any of our ladies out as we have taken Miss Loree?" cried Desika. "They would be shocked, and there would be much talk and possibly some beatings in the zenana."

His light laughter rang out across the water as he conjured up the picture of the outraged Mrs. Grundys of his nation. Rama Rajah's brow contracted. The words, as well as the

cynical mirth, jarred upon him. He would fain have forgotten his country and his people for the moment. There would be time enough by-and-by to think of them; just now the hour was devoted to Ranee.

His eyes rested affectionately upon the girl seated in the stern. His feeling towards her was a curious mixture of tenderness approaching in its thoughtfulness the tenderness of a lover, and of warm fraternal love. It was the love which the strong feel for the weak. He might have experienced something of the same sort of emotion towards a child that sheltered itself in his strength. When she was within sight or sound the consciousness of her helplessness was ever present with him. He found himself watching over her movements attentive to her smallest need. But as he rendered her knightly service with unfailing devotion, his blood did not stir nor his heart leap at the chance touch of her hand. The passion which the man feels for the woman who is his fate for good or for evil, for happiness or for misery still slumbered serenely in his breast.

The thought of holding her dearer than a beloved sister never entered his mind. Had it been suggested to him that a closer tie might have been formed, he would have thrust it aside as impossible. His perfect manhood would have shrunk instinctively from mating himself with imperfection. The animal within him, noble though it might be, was opposed to anything that was maimed. His humanity, his warm generous nature made him tender and compassionate towards the afflicted daughter of his tutor, but to love her, worship her, mate with her, and make her the mother of his children, would have been contrary to all his inherited instincts. In his boyhood he had early learned to look to her for sympathy and for instruction in the ways of the strange nation into which he had been suddenly plunged, a friendless boy, and the result had been the building up of a friendship that could not be obliterated by separation nor by racial differences. To both of them, the motherless girl and the exiled boy, their friendship had been the very medicine of life, but it was nothing more to him. Love had

never entered his heart. No vision of the golden land with Ranee as its queen had disturbed his soul. Nor had he any suspicion that his adopted sister had herself crossed the border and touched with thrilling fingers the first flowers of love's fairyland. Dreams wherein he reigned as Maharajah, where life was glorious with unspeakable bliss, had come to her in her solitary hours when the pupils were shut in the study with her father, and Miss Beauchamp was busy with household affairs.

She listened to the sounds of nature around her as she sat beneath the elm-trees, the singing of the birds, the humming of the bees, the murmur of the wind in the tree-tops ; but above them all rang the voice that she loved, creating a melody in her heart that filled her with joy, and she enthroned him in the midst of her dream-kingdom as lord. The dark world in which she dwelt became beautiful. What was light ? Something to be loved, something to be enjoyed, something that brought intense pleasure to those who could see it. Such was the effect of the sound of Rama's voice to her. It was her light. When he spoke, when he was near, when she felt his presence close at hand, a glorious radiance enveloped her. The darkness was dispelled, and she was bathed in light.

Then came Newent and the light was clouded. The golden dream was shattered. The lord of her dream-kingdom belonged to another and might no longer be enthroned. Yet their friendship was unbroken, and Dolores was not altogether cast back into the darkness.

As they moved slowly along the water-way, crowded now with boat-loads of happy idlers, she was lost for the moment on the outskirts of her own secret garden of Eden, whilst he, with eyes of tender pity, was wondering who would take his place to row her on the river, to guide her feet along its bank, to gather the scented sedge and meadow-sweet that she loved, and to lend her eyes to see the beauties of the seasons as they came. He remembered long ago, when she asked him to describe the fluttering butterfly, how he had caught one and placed it in her hand without injuring it. The soft touch of its wings delighted her.

"I can see it!" she cried. "It is softer than silk. Is it like the twinkling of a star?"

He had lately presented the dainty boat to her, expressing a hope that some of his fellow-pupils would take her out in it. She had thanked him without echoing the wish. In her heart of hearts she was convinced that the charm of the river would end with his departure.

Desika, finding his companions inclined to silence, chattered on of the voyage, of the return home, and all that would be said and done.

"You won't care to be seen much with me after we leave the ship, Rama Rajah," he said, with a laugh.

"What is to prevent you from being together?" inquired Dolores.

"Caste. He is a Vellalan whilst I am only a Shanar."

"Mr. Newent tried to explain the difference," said Dolores, coming out of her dreams.

"The Vellalas are of a higher caste than the Shanars, though we are all Sudras. I always laugh when I hear my fellow-caste people boasting of their noble origin."

"Your father is one of the most advanced Hindus. If he does not take care his own caste will turn him out," remarked Ramah Rajah.

Desika's mocking laugh came again as he made reply. "We are too wealthy to be so lightly thrown aside; riches in India, as in England, cover a multitude of sins. Here a pariah who was a millionaire would be of more account than a Brahmin beggar. We shall come round to that way of thinking in India before long if we do not reform our progressive movements."

"Never!" cried Rama Rajah. "Caste is founded on religion, and religion has nothing to do with the class divisions of England."

"So you will despise me, I tell you, Rama Rajah, me and all my belongings, my good friend, when we meet in our native land."

"You will be glad to see your sister again, Desika," said

Dolores, turning the conversation, guessing that it was distasteful to Rama Rajah.

"Indeed I shall ; but I shall not have her with me long. In my father's last letter, which arrived this morning, he tells me that he would like to send my sister Veerama to England. Miss Loree!" exclaimed Desika, with sudden inspiration, "will you take care of her and be to her what your father has been to me? In his letter my father asks me if I know of any home or school where he could place my sister. The ladies at the Mission School, where she has been educated up to the present, have recommended him to give her three or four years in England."

Dolores' face assumed a thoughtful expression as her mind rapidly reviewed his proposition. The Hindu talked on, becoming each moment more enthusiastic and eager in his pleading.

"How old is she?"

"She is thirteen. One great reason for sending her to England is to avoid the necessity of marrying her just yet."

"She is much too young to be married," protested Dolores.

"On the contrary, I assure you that, according to our custom, she is already a little too old for matrimony. She should have been married at eight ; but my father has advanced views and does not believe that child-marriage is good for the nation nor for the individual. So he has refused all offers for my sister's hand, and she will have a respite for three or four more years if she comes to you. Do be kind, Miss Loree, and let my little sister find a shelter under your protecting wing."

"I must consult my father before I promise anything. Are you married, Desika?"

"No, I am glad to say that my liberal-minded father considered my welfare as well as that of my sister. I am to choose for myself when I return."

"Will you be allowed to see the girl?"

"The Shanars do not keep their women behind the curtain. There are very few purdashin ladies in the South,

and although I shall not have the same liberty as I have here, I shall be able to use my eyes and perhaps have speech with the lady in the presence of her parents. But, after all, I may prefer to leave it to my mother. Choosing a wife is a great responsibility ; " he continued with one of his swift changes of mood. " If the marriage proves a failure my people will blame me. Now, if Rama Rajah has occasion to find fault with his wife, he may beat her and send her back to her family without blame, since he had no voice in the matter."

" Beat her ! Nonsense, Desika ! I am sure that Rama Rajah would never do such a thing."

" You do not understand, Ranee. Desika is chaffing," explained Rama Rajah.

Dolores smiled as she replied, " How stupid of me not to know that he was only making fun of my ignorance. Desika, are you ever serious ? "

" Never, Miss Loree. The gods laughed when I was born, and I shall laugh to the end of my days," he returned lightly, in his clear, metallic accents.

" Why did the gods laugh ? "

" At the thought of my father having a son upon whom he could experimentalize. You behold the result, a failed examinee, a trifler, a mere windbag, of whom we have too many in India. But as a congress-wallah I intend to retrieve my character. I shall become a leader of the most advanced party, a propounder of the most advanced theories. And I shall probably show in my life how wide is the difference between theory and practice."

" It sounds very insincere," suggested Dolores, with a doubtful smile.

" I assure you," he protested, " that I shall be most sincere, most earnest, most enthusiastic while I am speaking to young India of the necessity of political reform and progress. I shall be equally sincere and earnest when I am in the bosom of my family, conforming to the ancient domestic ceremonies so dear to the hearts of our women. Please don't look so shocked. I am not an Englishman, although at this moment

I happen to be wearing English clothes and using the English language. I have none of the responsibilities of the Englishman. Now, Rama Rajah is differently placed."

"How do you make out that I am subject to a different code of morals, Desika?" demanded Rama Rajah, with some amusement.

"Have you not joined the great body of our rulers—our oppressors, I shall call you, when I take my stand upon the Congress platform? And are you not bound body and soul to act towards the oppressed—of whom I am one—on the lines laid down by the English Government? Ha! Ha! Rama Rajah, Pillai, of His Majesty's Indian Civil Service, you have your path of rectitude and integrity marked out for you, whilst I, Desika Badra, Nadan, the son of the merchant, may kick my heels and allow my tongue to wag as it pleases on behalf of the oppressed."

"Desika, how you run on!" cried Dolores. "Tell me why you call yourself oppressed?"

"Because, Miss Loree, we are not permitted to fly at each other's throats, and play that delightful game of general post which was the favourite pastime of our ancestors. It is a fascinating game, wherein those who are up go down, and those who are down climb up. Some heads are broken, it is true, and a few temples and mosques are damaged; but what of that? The excitement, the talk, the indignation, the chance of bettering one's self, the fear of being trampled underfoot, and of losing one's wealth, all are as the breath of life to us after a period of stagnation and torpidity. So cruel are our oppressors that they will not permit us to indulge in our time-honoured religious riots and caste disputes. All we have left is the congress, a mere bladder inflated by cheap gas, without even the power of causing an explosion. Ah! cursed, thrice cursed rulers!" he concluded, in mock wrath, shaking a fist in Rama's smiling face, and causing the light boat to rock.

"Is your father of the same way of thinking?" asked Dolores.

"Not he! His advancement in thought shows itself in quite another manner."

"Does he speak in Congress?"

"Only to warn us to be careful not to break our necks in the pace we are going. It is not my father, but his son who rouses the gods to laughter."

"You must write me an account of your first speech," said Dolores.

"My first speech is a thing of the past. I laid it at the feet of the gods when I was but a schoolboy of sixteen. It was made to an assembly of five hundred young hot-heads between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six, just before I came to England. In it I proclaimed the latest theories of liberty and progress. I boasted of our ancient civilization, our hoary religion, and demanded India for the Indians. I assure you that there was a perfect thunder of applause, and I was hailed as a man born to rule! Me, a lad of sixteen! Yet I was ready to rule if I could only meet with the opportunity. The thought of governing three hundred millions raised no qualms, no misgivings in my mind. I felt quite equal to the task. But Great Britain did not invite me to take it up. On the contrary I was plucked and Rama Rajah was chosen instead."

"What were your theories of liberty and progress?"

"Do not ask me. I have told you all that I remember of them. Ideas course through my brain like the water down this water-way. Can your river remember every stick and straw that floated down her stream last year, last month, last week, or even yesterday? Neither do I recall the theories of yesterday. The business of Congress is with the sticks and straws of to-day."

"Do not listen to him any longer, Ranee; he is full of inflammatory gas," said Rama Rajah, as he pulled the skiff round to return.

"Laughing gas," amended Desika, with perfect good-humour.

But though they were beguiled into smiling at the light irresponsible chatter of their companion, there was no mirth

in the hearts of Rama Rajah and Dolores. The golden hours of the summer's day fled all too quickly. The return voyage was made and the boat glided up to the landing-stage. It was held fast to the side by Desika, whilst Rama Rajah helped Dolores to step ashore. Slowly they wended their way to the house, the young men turning frequently to look back at the familiar scene where they had spent so many happy hours.

They were to leave Maidenhead that evening, dine and sleep in town, and start by the morning continental train to join their steamer at Marseilles. After tea Mr. Avondean summoned them to his study.

As he entered, Desika glanced restlessly round the room, noting the pictures and books, the writing-table, the flowers, with a curious mixture of pleasure and regret, as he realized that his eyes rested on them for the last time. His light, buoyant nature required change and variety. Life to be tolerable for him needed the salt of excitement. Although the last three years had been the happiest of his existence, he was already conscious of the approach of the stagnation and torpidity which he had so lately deprecated. His heart beat at the thought of returning to his native land, and in imagination he saw himself surrounded by a group of wondering fellow-countrymen, who hung breathless on his word as he described the wonders and delights of his experience in England.

Rama Rajah's brown eyes, eyes less black than Newent's, were fixed upon his tutor in deep and undivided attention as he listened to his counsels.

"You are Hindus, believing in the existence of a living God, the All-Father of Goodness and Truth. Live righteously to please Him, and you need have no fear of the thousand devils worshipped by the masses of your land, to your and their dishonour. Remember that you will both stand before your countrymen as witnesses of Western education. See that you do not disgrace your teaching. It behoves you, Rama, to bear this fact constantly in mind, now that you have entered the ranks of the rulers of India."

All this, and a great deal more, fell from the lips of the

good old tutor. In Rama's mind it was like rain upon fertile land; but upon the mind of Desika, cased in its shell of flippancy, it pattered like hail upon glass, rousing thoughts half cynical, half humorous, recalling the paternal lectures of his early days, and making no lasting impression.

Meanwhile, Dolores sat beneath the elms at the end of the lawn listening for the echo of footsteps along the gravel walk. She was motionless, except for an occasional interlacing of the fingers, by which slight movement she seemed able to subdue her impatience, and preach peace to her beating heart. Even now, as she faced the parting, she did not realize the true state of her feelings towards the Hindu. The suggestion that she had fallen in love with her father's pupil, and given her love to him unasked, unsought, would have been repudiated with indignation and outraged modesty.

Yet it was with a strange consciousness of agony that she waited, not knowing why the knife was in her soul. At the sound of their feet upon the gravel as they issued from the garden door, the colour flooded her delicate skin, staining cheek and brow. Her ear also detected another warning sound, the roll of wheels upon the carriage drive. It was the fly which was to take Rama Rajah and Desika to the station.

"We have come to say good-bye, Miss Loree," said Desika, more soberly than was his wont. "You have been very good to us, and I, for one, am grateful."

"It has been a pleasure," she murmured, finding her voice with difficulty.

"One last request I have to make, that you will be good to my little sister. I am sure that she will come to you, as your father has kindly consented to receive her."

She reassured him on that point as he shook her hand warmly.

"Good-bye, Miss Loree; I shall always think of you as the good fairy of my youth. I must not stay any longer, as I want to see to the luggage."

Desika left her with Rama Rajah and hurried back to the house. Did he shrewdly guess that those two would prefer to

exchange their final words of farewell without the presence of a third? He was a strange creature, foreign in every instinct, every impulse. His glittering flippancy, his startling inconsistencies, his varying moods covered the real humanity, and hid it completely from sight. Was it god-like or of the nature of a demon? Not even his own father could say.

"I am sorry to be leaving you, Ranee," said Rama Rajah, his voice less steady than usual. "To you I owe a happy boyhood, such as could not possibly have been my lot in my own country."

"It has been a mutual pleasure, a mutual benefit. You have brought light into my darkened life, Rama Rajah, and I should like to thank you for all your tender care."

The allusion to her infirmity, the blemish of her otherwise perfect womanhood jarred upon him. He would have preferred to have forgotten it at that moment when they were drawn together closer than usual by a common grief.

"Do not mention it. What have I done? Nothing but what a brother might have done. It has been a joy to me, and has made your father's house more like home than a house of exile."

"You will write and tell me about yourself and—and your wife."

She spoke hurriedly, expecting each moment to hear Desika calling for his fellow-traveller. The answer was given without embarrassment.

"Of course I will write, and you shall hear everything about my appointment and work as well, which will be still more interesting."

"I shall want to know about your home life. I was surprised that you did not mention the fact of your marriage," she said, with a note of reproach in her tone.

"Why should I? It was unimportant—at least of no more importance than the periodical religious ceremonies which are part of a boy's life from his birth to his manhood. They are all arranged by the family without consulting the object of them."

"We regard these matters, especially marriage, in a different light."

"You must not forget that I am a Hindu. While I have lived with you, I have lived like an Englishman. Now I am returning to my country to live like a Hindu, hoping to bring into my life some of the principles which ought to be cosmopolitan and not the monopoly of European nations."

"Rama ! Rama !" called Desika from the house.

Dolores, who had risen from her chair, extended both her hands, saying in a voice that trembled—

"Good-bye, Rajah ! You have been my dearest friend for years ; you have been more to me than any other. Though divided by the sea our friendship will remain. Don't forget me."

"Your memory will always be with me like a pearl, a wonderful pearl that I carry in my heart, Ranee."

He took her hands and bent over them, kissing them warmly and repeatedly.

"Rama ! Rama ! We are late !"

At the second summons he turned and went swiftly towards the house. Mr. Avondean stood upon the doorstep whilst Desika, his eyes burning with excitement, waited impatiently for his lingering companion. A few seconds later Dolores heard the sound of the wheels passing along the drive that was bounded on either side by the sweet meadows. Her ear followed it as the carriage turned out into the dusty Cookham road on its way to the railway station. And as the noise of the rumbling wheels died in the distance, the darkness of her world closed in upon her like a cruel pall, shutting out the light that had of late years coloured her life with a rare happiness.

Two months passed, and the yellow leaves fell in showers before the boisterous gales of autumn. Dolores, sitting in her drawing-room by a bright fire, listened as Miss Beauchamp read aloud a long Indian letter. In it Rama Rajah described his voyage out, the meeting with his people, their joy over his return. He had received orders to take up the appointment

of assistant collector in the Madura district which would necessitate his residence at the town of Madura. Of his marriage he said but little. It had been consummated with a great tamasha of fireworks, feasting, almsgiving, and visiting. He spoke of it all without a spark of enthusiasm, and was absolutely silent upon the subject about which Dolores most craved for information, the personality of his wife. Was she amiable and pretty? Was she sympathetic and helpful? On these points he was dumb. The only hint he gave was in one sentence—

“ My wife, I fear, has been too long resident in her father's house.”

Dolores was at a loss to understand the meaning of it. Finally she decided that it was a comment on his own conduct. He had delayed his return too long and his bride felt the rupture with her own family more than she would have done had she been removed at an earlier age. But this interpretation was wide of the mark.

Mr. Avondean received more than one letter from Desika, the chief topic of the correspondence being the reception of Veerama into the Avondean household. Incidentally he mentioned the fact that his father was living at Madura where, besides a manufactory for cigars, he had a large cotton-press, the machinery of which was worked by a new water-power brought by the skill of the Government engineers from distant hills. He alluded to Rama Rajah, saying that he had settled in a house not far from that of Sobraon Rao, and that he had renewed his intercourse with his old friend, although the two families, being of a different caste, were not intimate. Rama Rajah's parents and a large circle of relations had gathered round him under the same roof according to Hindu custom.

“ So far, Rama Rajah makes an excellent assistant collector. He is fully alive to his duties, whilst the various members of his family are fully alive to their advantages as near relatives of a Government official,” wrote Desika.

Dolores could almost hear the light scornful laugh with which he must have set down the words. Her father half

comprehended the possible web of difficulties with which the native civilian was entangled, and uttered the words, "Poor Rama Rajah ! I am sure that he means to do his best."

His daughter made no comment. Not knowing the country, it was impossible for her to understand the thorns that beset the path of the Hindu who would serve his King-Emperor.

CHAPTER IV

THE ASSISTANT COLLECTOR

AMBROSE NEWENT, the Collector of Madura—that is to say, the senior civilian in the service of Government, who ruled over the district of Madura—lived in one of the largest houses of the town of that name. His little kingdom comprised an area of about the size of five English counties and he had the assistance of subordinates to help him in his duties.

His house was not far from the beautiful tank known as the teppacolum, which had been artificially formed in the ancient days long before the British Raj. The teppacolum was encircled by a road open to the public, which road separated it from the private houses in its vicinity. Spreading banyan trees shaded the broad highway and stretched their long arms over the walls and fences that hedged in the grounds of the private dwellings. The fertile soil and warm moist climate clothed garden and roadside alike with a royal wealth of blossom and foliage, except when the long, lean arm of famine was extended over the land. Then the grass turned a pale straw-colour and the stiff brown leaves of the trees rustled in the hot blasts or sailed away in “devils’ chariots” at the will of the furious whirlwind.

There had been a shortage of rainfall in the last monsoon, and though the compounds of the houses showed no sign of failure in their water-supply, the fields that did not lie near the river were less green than usual. The foliage on the noble avenue trees, which are the glory of the great Southern road, was less luxuriant and allowed the blazing midday sun to

penetrate in broad patches of dazzling light through the network of the branches.

Within the compound walls, thanks to the assiduous care of the gardener, the scarlet hibiscus shrubs tossed their discs of colour on the morning air. Oleanders, milk-white, salmon and pink, ixoras of coral tint, gardenias with wax-like flowers set in leaves of glistening green grew in profusion under noble poinciana trees and magnolia-scented plumerias. Near the houses the Persian roses shed a wealth of sweetness upon the warm air. The garden beds were filled with zinnias, balsams, correopsis, and African marigolds, all growing in rank profusion and making glorious splashes of colour on the verdant background of the shrubs. Gay butterflies hovered with strong swift flight over the beds undisturbed by the presence of the men with the watering-cans.

The house of the Collector, built after the usual fashion of South Indian dwellings, possessed a wide verandah, the roof of which was supported on pillars of marble-white chunam. Beneath its shelter were grouped palms and ferns and variegated foliage plants, that lent colour with their leaves as the sunborn blossoms adorned the garden.

The blinds were lowered before the open doorways of the drawing-room which led into the verandah, subduing the brilliant glare of the day to a cool twilight. But sunlight or darkness mattered little to the occupant of the room, who with delicate white fingers traced the raised type of a book that rested on a small table. Her attention wandered, and the hands frequently lay motionless upon Braille cypher. She was not asleep, but the stillness of the house indicated that the rest of the establishment, including the master and the mistress, might be indulging in an afternoon nap.

Already the kettle was singing upon the charcoal fire in the back verandah, whilst the sleepy servant set the tea-tray in leisurely fashion.

Dolores, accompanied by Veerama and Miss Beauchamp, had lately arrived from England. Four years had passed quickly, during which time she had fulfilled the promise she

had given to Desika of guiding the studies of the Indian girl committed to her care.

Veerama had not come to her steeped in ignorance, either of intellectual matters or of well-bred behaviour. Sobraon Rao had given his daughter an excellent education in a boarding school managed by mission ladies. When it was suggested by his fellow-caste men that the girl ran a risk of being Christianized, he expressed his dissent.

"Let her hear all that is to be heard ; let her listen well and she will do nothing rash. It is only those who don't look at what is on the other side of the wall, who break their necks in attempting to climb over it."

So Veerama learned many things from the missionaries besides history and geography, and how to speak and behave like a well-bred English girl. Her knowledge was further increased by her four years' intimacy with Miss Avondean.

Then, when Mr. Avondean died, passing away suddenly one day in the midst of work, there seemed to be no reason why his daughter should not travel, and no reason why those travels should not extend as far as India. But there was no hurry to reach that distant land. So, with Veerama as a companion and Miss Beauchamp to act as courier and guide, Dolores turned her back upon England and wandered through France and Italy, lingering here where she felt the benefit of the climate, and there where Veerama enjoyed the sights. The sensitive emotional maid from the East had a curious gift for imparting her impressions to her blind friend, and Dolores was often able to see with her eyes when the matter-of-fact governess could throw no light into the darkened world.

Thus they came in time to Naples and there they went on board one of the big liners sailing to the East.

Veerama's home was in Madura, not among the houses occupied by the Europeans, but at the other end of the town. The rich tobacco fields belonging to her father came close up to it on the north side, and stretched in broad bands of green from the walls of the building down to the river banks.

Between the house and the town stood one of the cigar factories which brought wealth to Sobraon Rao.

Veerama was in no hurry to return to her home ; not that she feared any galling restraint from purdashin rules and old-fashioned observances. Her advanced father had long ago emancipated the female members of his family from the few restrictions which were thought necessary by his own caste where there was wealth, declaring that, the Shanars had never hidden their women behind the purdah, but had sent them out into the fields to work ; and that any pretence of purdah life was mere arrogance, and contrary to all the ancient legends. His wife, together with the large family circle sheltered beneath his roof, regarded these unsought concessions with suspicion ; they used their own discretion in the exercise of the unwonted liberties and were careful to preserve a semblance of the seclusion of which Sobraon professed himself indifferent.

When Ambrose Newent heard of Dolores' proposed visit to the South of India, he repeated the invitation he had given so warmly at Maidenhead. She accepted it readily, but added an earnest request that she might bring Veerama with her for a few days before the girl rejoined her father.

Newent glanced at his wife as she held the letter dictated by Dolores and written in Veerama's neat hand. It was an unusual request, and showed complete ignorance of the social conditions of the Hindu lady's world. After a moment's hesitation, Newent said—

“ You may say yes ; but I must see Sobraon Rao before we take it for granted that the girl will come.”

“ He will probably refuse the invitation for his daughter without giving her a choice and perhaps without a word of thanks to us, whereas he ought to feel honoured,” remarked Mrs. Newent.

“ I am not sure what he will do. He is very advanced in his views, but caste keeps a firm grip upon the Hindu.”

“ He is not one of the higher castes.”

“ All the same, a Shanar holds himself superior to the Pariahs, and you must remember that all our servants are

Pariahs, including the cook, who will have to prepare her food."

To the surprise of Newent, Sobraon Rao, whom he frequently met in consultation over municipal matters, received the invitation graciously, and readily consented to his daughter being the guest of the Collector for a short time.

"I shall be away from home when she arrives, and she can remain with you till I return," Sobraon Rao said.

"What about my Pariah cook? You don't mind, Sobraon Rao," asked Newent in friendly fashion.

"Not in the least, sir. Do I not take my cup of tea at the refreshment-room on the railway, in company with a number of other men including Englishmen, and from the hands of a Pariah servant? These matters are rectifying themselves and reform is coming, as it should, from within."

"Do you think that you will ever throw caste aside altogether?"

"Never; but we shall remodel its rules to suit modern life. Perhaps we shall recast the whole system, taking education and wealth into consideration. Of one thing I can assure you, Mr. Newent."

"What is that?"

"That we shall not allow any outsiders—foreigners or rulers—to interfere."

"All right, Sobraon Rao; you need not be afraid of interference. All we English shall do is to see that you do not break each other's heads over it," replied Newent, with a laugh in which the municipal councillor joined.

Dolores arrived, bringing Veerama with her. She was charmed with Anglo-Indian life as it presented itself to her. She could not see the gorgeous colouring and dazzling light of the tropics; but there was much that she could feel and hear which impressed her with something approaching the glamour of the East.

But whilst she gave herself up to the novelty and enjoyment of it all, the voyage, the sailing over a warm summer sea through moist breezes in the Indian Ocean, the strange

language of the foreign people, a great joy dominated all other emotion. It was subdued and scarcely recognized as she wandered on the Continent. She was conscious of it as she set foot upon the ship that was to take her out to India. And now as she waited in the large silent room for the moment when she was to hear the beloved voice again, her whole being thrilled with happiness. Rama Rajah was coming ! She was to touch his hand ! she was to listen to those musical tones that had brought light into her life by the river ! Since she had said good-bye beneath the elms, no one had taken his place. Other pupils had been thoughtful and kind, had rowed her on the Thames, had guided her hands and feet, but none had come so near to her heart. Even Veerama, tender and solicitous as she had been, was unable to enter the inner shrine which was sacred to Rama Rajah alone. And Dolores had kept her secret. Her father least of all divined the truth. Blinder than his daughter in his devotion to his work, he saw nothing of the pale cheek, the new lines that faintly marked the perfect face of the girl as she changed to the woman. To Miss Beauchamp, whose life ran in a groove, Dolores was always more or less of a child, who, for the sake of her affliction, ought to be treated with every indulgence.

Acutely sensitive to sound, Dolores had already learned, in the three days she had been under Newent's roof, the signs of Anglo-Indian life. The distant chink coming through the open doors, told her that tea was in preparation. The pleasant wash of falling water from the pots of the gardeners proclaimed that half-past three had struck. The warble of a black robin, perched upon the brilliant poinsettia, indicated that the garden was growing cooler after the blaze of noon, and birds, as well as men, were beginning to stir abroad.

A neat brougham, drawn by a showy Arab horse, drew up beneath the portico. Instantly a belted peon hurried forward, whilst a second man passed behind a screen at the end of the verandah into the master's sitting-room, called by the servants the office. Newent rose from his long-armed chair, where he

had been indulging in forty winks, and came out to greet his subordinate.

"When did you arrive from the district, Rama Rajah?" he asked, as he shook the hand of the visitor.

"This morning; I found your note awaiting me and am replying to it in person."

"That's right. Miss Avondean is here, and will be delighted to meet you again. Before you go into the drawing-room I want to ask you a question or two about the trouble at the village of Sivapet. Could you get at the truth?"

"I did my best. It seems that the Tahsildar and Munsif, who are related, had a dispute over the irrigation of their land. Their fields adjoin, and some time ago the Tahsildar's servant, in the night, made a breach in the bund that divides the fields, and let the water run off the Munsif's ground on to that of his master. The Tahsildar denied all previous knowledge of the action, and declares that he punished the man. But the action injured the Munsif's crop, as the time was past for drawing off more water from the big channel, and the season has been unusually dry. So the crop is poor in consequence."

"I suppose it has created bad blood between them?"

"The two families were never very friendly. The Tahsildar's brother was a candidate for the Munsif's appointment, claiming it as his inheritance, as his grandfather held it before the present appointment was made. He never could understand that Government had the power of putting in any member of the family who was thought to be most suitable."

"And he might have been appointed," remarked Newent, "if he had not been so foolish as to offer a bribe with a request that I would overrule any other nomination that you might make."

"The post of Munsif is vacant again," said Rama Rajah.

"Why? What has happened?" demanded his chief, turning suddenly upon him with an inquiring look.

"The Munsif died four nights ago—it is said of cholera."

"H'm, poisoned?"

"There was no proof. The apothecary certified that it

was cholera, and the relations declare themselves to be satisfied."

Newent asked what candidates had presented themselves for the post. His Assistant explained that a request had come from the son, who was too young ; and from the brother of the Munsif, who was more suitable. The Tahsildar's brother and another relative had also applied for it.

"Don't let it go to any member of the Tahsildar's family," counselled Newent. "Are there any more applicants?"

"My mother's family has for some time past petitioned me to remember one of their number when a village appointment was vacant."

"Don't give ear to them, Rama Rajah. It is a mistake. You can't keep that sort of thing dark. It must come out ; it rouses the suspicions of the authorities at once if any perferment is made in favour of the members of an official's family," Newent said, with some earnestness.

"I have already refused to grant their request. But they wrung a promise from me that I would mention the matter to you, and I have done so," replied Rama Rajah, simply.

The Collector's eyes dwelt upon his Assistant with a sympathetic regard. No one knew better than Newent the burden of temptation that lay on those young shoulders. More than once he had acted on the initiative in matters which were, by right, the prerogative of the younger civilian, so that Rama Rajah might be spared the importunities of his family. But it was not easy to make any departure from the ordinary routine. There were plenty of natives ready to assert that the chief had shown distrust by meddling. Moreover, there would come a time when Rama Rajah would have to stand alone, and would have a subordinate under him ; and in preparation for that time, Newent was endeavouring to teach him to act independently and conscientiously.

"Whom do you honestly believe would be the right person to put in as Munsif?" inquired Newent.

"His brother. He is popular in the village, and he will step into the place naturally, and will keep the household

together. The son is unmarried and little more than a schoolboy, though he has reached the eligible age."

"It seems to me a just choice, and if there has by chance been any foul play, the miscreant will not benefit by it. Now, come into the drawing-room and see your old friend."

As they talked in the verandah the sound of Rama Rajah's voice penetrated into the cool depths of the room. At his first words Dolores had risen from her seat, breathless, silent, expectant. She was thankful for the few minutes' respite, during which she was able to still the throbbing of her heart, and regain her self-possession. When they entered they found her smiling and ready with a few well-chosen words of welcome. She laid her hand in that of Rama Rajah.

"It is good to meet you again, Rajah," she said, her voice trembling slightly.

"Good for me whatever it may be for you, Ranee," he replied warmly, using the old familiar term which was his special privilege. The sound of it brought the colour with a sudden rush to her cheeks. Newent waited a few seconds, and then said—

"You will not be going away just yet, so I shall see you again. I must go and finish the letters over which I fell asleep."

He left them, and sent a peon, as he went back to the office, to pull up the blinds.

"Come and sit near me, Rajah, I have so much to tell you and still more to hear."

She made room for him on the sofa by her side. As he took his seat she lifted her hand and touched him lightly on the arm and shoulder, running her fingers with a fluttering butterfly motion up his neck and head. Their contact brought back bygone days, when, with touch instead of sight, she recognized the shaven head with which he arrived as a boy, and the long *kudumi*, the lock of hair, hanging from his crown.

"First, let me see if there is any change in you. You are wearing the turban. It must be much more becoming than a hat. And what are these folds across your chest?"

"It is the only other piece of native dress besides the turban that I have on; a fine white muslin scarf, bordered with gold, like my turban. For the rest, my clothes are the same as I wore in England, but of thinner tweed."

Having satisfied herself that he had not changed in appearance, she demanded to be told all about his work. He complied with manifest pleasure, explaining the many duties that devolved upon him; and how he spent a large portion of the year travelling about the district, seeing to the administration of the laws that respect the rights of all men alike.

"I delight in my work, and hope to spend the rest of my life in it. It is absorbingly interesting, Ranee, to exercise a power that is free from all selfishness, and not founded upon the granting of favours, but upon its own recognized justice."

"How pleased my father would have been to have heard you say that," said Dolores, softly.

"It was he who taught me to appreciate the English system of government. The more I see of its working, the more I marvel at the rulers who have succeeded in planting their system in a land where there was nothing but misrule, injustice, and oppression. My only regret is that my family do not seem capable of comprehending its greatness. Like the rest of the people of the land, they cannot understand that we must work for the good of the community, and not merely for the good of the individual."

For some time they talked, and Rama Rajah found himself slipping back into the old relations. The fascination of the old companionship reasserted itself, and a keen unusual pleasure filled his soul. There was no one throughout the length and breadth of India to whom he could open his heart thus, to whom he could speak of his troubles, domestic or professional, as he was speaking now to this English Ranee of his boyhood. He was just beginning to realize the charm of it, when the tinkle of silver bangles caused Dolores to lift her head.

"Come in, Veerama. Come and be introduced to my old friend, a fellow-countryman of yours."

They rose together, the hand of the blind lady resting lightly upon her companion's arm. He glanced towards the door and saw a Hindu girl approaching. She was tall and well-grown in figure; and, as is so frequent with caste women, her features were regular and small, the lips being curved and full. She was dressed in a white muslin frock of simple English cut and over the frock was draped the Indian saree. A gold belt of solid but pliant metal encircled her waist, keeping the saree in its place. Her arms, bare to the elbow, were adorned with handsome bracelets, and about her neck was a rope of fine pearls. As she stood before him, with the ease and dignity of an English lady, she was a vision of perfect Oriental beauty. There was no sign of self-consciousness to mar that beauty, no shadow of the foolish simper that he knew too well, and was learning to dread in his own wife.

"You have not shaken hands," exclaimed Dolores, with her quickened perception.

Her fingers closed over those of Rama Rajah and with the other hand she felt for the hand of the girl. Bringing them together she said—

"You are both very dear to me. As my friends you must be friends with each other."

Rama Rajah stood motionless, withdrawing his hand as soon as he could from the somewhat unwilling clasp of the girl. The latter divined what was passing in his mind, and drawing herself up with a dignity that matched his own and at the same time surprised him, she said—

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Rama Rajah, Pillai. Together we share the friendship of one who is dear to us both." Then, changing to Tamil, she added: "You are a Vellalan; I am of the Shanar caste; our families cannot possibly be friends. Loree does not understand that there are difficulties in the way of friendship between the king-crow and the bat. But for her sake let us be English whilst we are

near her, and preserve at least a semblance of friendship, or she will be unhappy."

"With pleasure, lady, if you will permit it. I shall take care always to bear in mind the fact that you are the sister of my old companion in exile, Desika Badra, Nadan."

"What are you two saying in that queer language of yours, Rama Rajah?"

"That for your sake, Ranee, we will be friends although fate has not caused us to be born in the same caste."

"Ah, I forgot! When I am with those I love, I forget everything but the fact that I love them as brother and sister."

The servant entered with the tea and having arranged it he touched a gong. At its summons Mrs. Newent appeared, her husband following. She dispensed the tea, Rama Rajah waiting on Dolores with his old attention and finding the old pleasure in it. He was assisted by Veerama, who refused to be altogether superseded. Presently she also received her cup from the hand of her hostess.

"Do you find this tea as good as that which we used to drink beneath the elms upon the lawn?" asked Dolores of Rama Rajah.

There was a slight pause which Newent himself broke by saying—

"I am sure that he does not find it as good, for the very excellent reason that he is not taking any."

"Oh, but why? You used to love your afternoon cup of tea, Rama Rajah," inquired Dolores.

"I have given it up," he replied, with some hesitation.

"Have you found something else that you like better? There is nothing that comes up to tea, in my opinion, and in a hot climate like this it is doubly acceptable. There is lemonade in the dining-room which I am sure Mrs. Newent will give you, if you prefer it to tea."

His embarrassment increased, and he was thankful when his chief again stepped into the breach and made the necessary explanation. Mrs. Newent addressed a remark to

the Assistant Collector by way of diverting his attention, and setting him at his ease.

"Rama Rajah is bound by his caste rules to eat and drink only that which is prepared by one of his own caste," said Newent.

Dolores listened with the shadow of distress on her face.

"There was no difficulty about his food when he was with us," she protested. "He always loved his tea, especially in warm summer weather when we had it beneath the elms on the lawn. If he could take it then why cannot he take it now?"

"For the sake of his education it was necessary that he should go to England, and this involved the breaking of his caste. Since he returned his caste has been restored, and it would be unwise to break it again even for the sake of Miss Avondean."

In between the sentences he was exchanging with his hostess, Rama Rajah could hear what Newent was saying, and as he caught the purport of his words, the hot blood coursed through his veins. Yet his chief was only stating the true facts of the case.

"Veerama finds no obstacle in conforming to our ways and eating with us," asserted Dolores. "She is having tea with us at this very moment, is she not?"

"She is of a different caste, but her liberty is due to her father's advanced views; he thinks that in some respects the laws of caste should be relaxed."

"Will she have to be restored to her caste?"

"I am not sure. Probably it will depend upon whom she marries, and whether he is of the same liberal mind as her father."

"Why was it necessary in the case of Rama Rajah?"

"His relations were old-fashioned and prejudiced, and they were insistent. Moreover, it was generally agreed that he would be held in greater respect by the people he was to assist me in governing, if he were in possession of the full status of his caste. You are not blaming him for conforming to the wishes of his family and his people, I hope?"

"I am just a little disappointed," she admitted, somewhat unwillingly; and lowering her voice lest Rama Rajah should hear, she added, "When he was in England with us, he ate with us and was constantly in my dear father's society and in mine as an equal; and on Sunday he went to church with me as though he were a Christian. It seems odd that after so many years of intimacy in the home circle, and of sympathy in religious matters, he should refuse to take a cup of tea with me on the score of religion."

"You must not blame him," said Newent, with some earnestness. "He is bound by the iron rules of a community. He will tell you so himself, if you ask him. Here he comes to take your cup, which you have neglected. I have been explaining to Miss Avondean, Rama Rajah, how it is that you can no longer join her at afternoon tea, and that it is no fault of yours."

Newent rose from his seat and signed to his Assistant to take it, which he did with a grateful glance.

"Are you very much hurt, Ranee?" asked the soft voice of her old friend. The magic tones were not without their effect.

"I suppose it is all right. I remember years ago Mr. Newent told me that I must come to your country to feel the racial difference between us. Rajah, I still have a great deal to say. Will you call and see me again soon? or are there any mysterious caste reasons why you should not?"

There was the suspicion of a pause before his answer came; but when he gave it, it was with a heartiness that removed all doubt.

"There are no caste reasons whatever why I should not see you frequently and have long talks with you."

Although he spoke with warmth a little sigh escaped him. She caught the sound and laid her hand upon his arm after her wont.

"You have much to tell me?" she queried in a low voice.

"Perhaps," he said, looking at her with contemplation as though he were weighing many things in his mind.

"Rajah, are you going to introduce me to your wife?"
The words startled him. "My wife! She will not interest you."

It was the same excuse which he had given when she had upbraided him for not having confided the fact of his marriage to her, during the many years he was resident under her father's roof.

"Anything that concerns you is of absorbing interest to me, as I told you once before. You have spoken to her of your life in England? of your old tutor? of me?"

He answered haltingly, more ill at ease than she without the use of her eyes could guess.

"Ranee, it was of no use. It is but folly to speak to the tortoise of the turtle dove. She could not understand."

"Whether she desires it or not, I have a strong wish to meet her, to hold her hand in mine, to hear her voice. Is she afraid to come out? Is she what you call purdahshin?"

"Not exactly. The women of the South are not purdahshin; but those who can afford to have closed carriages, like English ladies, use them, and do not walk in the streets."

"Has she a carriage?"

"Certainly; and my mother as well."

"Perhaps she is shy and nervous about coming out to see a stranger. I will call upon her."

His confusion increased, and after an awkward pause, during which she waited expectant, he said—

"My wife has not been educated like Desika's sister. She is full of prejudices and I do not know if she—she will receive you," he brought the words out with difficulty. "Our ways are so different from yours, and she has no knowledge of English manners."

"Then she can be no companion for you," she cried, with a touch of unconscious jealousy in her tone.

"The Hindu does not ask companionship from his wife."

"What then, does he require of her?"

"Obedience and motherhood."

"Has your wife fulfilled your expectations?"

He smiled, but not happily.

"I am bound to admit that my wife is not a mother, and also that she is not always obedient. She was left too long in her father's house."

During their conversation Newent had returned to his sitting-room, whilst Mrs. Newent had retired to dress for the evening drive. Veerama had also disappeared. They were therefore alone and Dolores was aware of the fact as her ears seldom failed her.

"Oh, let me see her! Let me meet her and speak with her! Leave it to me, and I will arrange it!" she cried.

At this moment the chink of the silver anklets and toe-rings warned Dolores that Veerama had returned.

CHAPTER V

THE ASSISTANT COLLECTOR AT HOME

As Veerama approached, Rama Rajah stood aside with the indescribable hauteur that marks the higher castes of India. His attitude was not exactly indicative of personal scorn or contempt. It was an instinctive aloofness, a sub-consciousness of superiority of birth which was controlled and partly concealed by that very superiority of breeding.

Veerama was aware of the reserve that enveloped him, and she experienced an impulse that was inherent to efface herself and remove her person from his sight. But her English training had been so contrary to all the promptings of caste that she involuntarily combated the sensation of inferiority and conquered it. Lifting her small head with dignity she addressed him personally. As she spoke the courtliness which he, too, had imbibed from the same foreign source caused him to listen. As he listened his eyes rested on her face with the appreciation which young men and women must feel for each other when the mental qualities are equal.

"Loree asked me to be sure to remember that you would like to see these photographs," she said, as she prepared to open the portfolio which she carried.

"To be sure!" cried Dolores. "I am so glad that you have not forgotten them, Veerama, as I had for the moment. I am told that they are very good, Rajah. Let me see if you can recognize the places."

The time slipped rapidly away as the talk flowed into smoother channels, and the Assistant Collector was beguiled

into temporary oblivion of family ties and caste rules. He found himself conversing easily with Veerama as though she were an English girl, and the fact that they used the English language helped to put them at their ease. Nor did it seem strange that he should be talking to a lady of his own nationality, with Dolores there to take the lead and direct the conversation.

They spoke of the river with sympathetic pleasure, of the song-birds in the woods in spring, of the gay crowd of boats in the summer, of the beauty of the landscape in autumn, and of the strange frost-bound land in winter. Led on by Dolores they discovered mutual friends in Maidenhead from whom both had accepted hospitality. The clock struck five and Mrs. Newent's carriage drove up to the verandah ; Rama Rajah sprang to his feet with an apology.

"I am keeping you from your evening drive, Ranee," he cried ; "and here comes Mrs. Newent ready to take you out."

He began to make his adieux without further delay.

"I have not said a quarter of what is in my mind ; and as for you, you have told me next to nothing about yourself," Dolores exclaimed, retaining his hand a moment. "You must come again soon, even though you won't drink tea with me."

"If Mrs. Newent will allow me," he replied, glancing at his chief's wife, who bent her head in cordial assent. "I shall be very glad to call again soon. I—I—have found no friend like you, Ranee."

The last sentence was uttered rapidly, and in a low regretful tone ; but her quick ear caught it, and she understood all that it meant.

He turned towards the verandah. The coachman of Mrs. Newent's carriage seeing him approach drove away to allow of the brougham being brought up to the portico. Rama Rajah could not help comparing the two equipages. They were both good of their kind ; but the appearance of his own neat brougham was utterly spoiled by the shabbiness of the coachman and syce. Their tattered clothes were not even clean, and he felt ashamed of being seen with such servants. For

once in his life he was glad that Miss Avondean had not the use of her eyes. He stepped quickly into the carriage, and was whirled out into the road towards the town by the prancing fretful Arab.

As he rode, leaning back on his cushions in deep contemplation, he had an opportunity of reviewing the situation. It was evident that his old friend had been surprised, and possibly a little pained at his refusal to join her in the pleasant informal afternoon meal. She did not understand the meaning of caste ; how could she ? Perhaps Mr. Newent had made it clearer to her. The blood surged to his brow as he thought of what an explanation might reveal. He recalled the ritual by which he had been reinstated, and shuddered at the recollection.

For some time after his return he had resolutely refused to perform the necessary ceremonies for the restitution of his caste. But his chief counselled compliance as he foresaw difficulties with the men over whom the Assistant had authority. If his own relations and caste people despised him, considering him degraded, was it likely that he would be respected by the rest of the world ? Reluctantly he consented to undergo the humiliating ceremonies, some of which were actually repulsive and nauseating as well as degrading in his Europeanized eyes. His family rejoiced—as indeed they had every reason—and Rama Rajah experienced the benefit immediately. It was shown within the house in the bearing of his relatives, of his attendants, of the servants outside the house. Even Lukshmi, his wife, the scornful capricious beauty of the establishment, bore herself with greater respect, and a little less scorn.

Abroad the contrast in the carriage of the men with whom he had dealings was marked, and though he sighed over the disagreeable memory of what he had gone through, he recognized the fact that he had done right in submitting to the ordeal. Yet such was the strange anomaly, the impossibility of reconciling the teaching of the West with the practice of the East, that he could not recall those dreadful ceremonies by which he rose in the estimation of his fellow-compatriots without a

burning sense of shame and humiliation of spirit. The thought that Dolores might learn some of the details was insupportable. He took comfort in the knowledge that they were of a nature which made it almost impossible for Mr. Newent to speak of them in detail to a lady without offending the canons of good taste. The only person who might be able to describe them would be Veerama. Would she do so? As he called to mind the refined intellectual face, the steadfast eye, and the full firm lips, he took courage. The training of Dolores had left its impress upon her character, and the sister of Desika, he felt sure, possessed the nobility of mind and generosity of spirit which so often marks the woman of the West irrespective of birth.

There was work waiting for the Assistant Collector which had accumulated during his absence in the district. When the brougham presently slowed down to a walking pace, he called impatiently to the coachman to go on.

“I cannot drive faster, sir; the road is blocked,” was the reply.

Rama Rajah looked out of the window. In the centre of the narrow street through which they were passing, walked a Brahmin beggar, his only garment being a travel-stained cloth wrapped round his loins. The syce with salaams and the utterance of the word “Swami” in an awed voice pointed to the impatient Arab champing its bit and rocking its elegant frame in high-stepping ambling. The Brahmin took no notice, but continued his way in the centre of the road. Had he been a man of low caste the syce would have acted very differently. After a warning shout he would have taken him unceremoniously by the shoulders and compelled him to go to the side. Under the circumstances the syce fell back, making a sign to the coachman, who took a firmer grip of the reins to check the impatience of the fiery steed. The effect of restraint was giving the occupant of the carriage a succession of jerks which were not only uncomfortable, but served to irritate a mind already sore with unpleasant thoughts. He beckoned to the syce who was on foot.

"Cannot the coachman pass on one side or the other?" he demanded.

"Excellency, it is impossible without endangering the life of the holy one. He will turn presently when we come to the street leading to the door of the temple by which all the holy ones enter."

The oriental nature of the Assistant Collector instinctively submitted to the time-honoured rule of giving place to the higher caste. But at the same time his European education roused in his breast a curious resentment towards the exercise of the Brahmin's prerogative. Here was a beggar, steeped in ignorance and swathed in a primitive garment suitable to a savage race, taking precedence of the highly educated Government official in whose hands rested an imperial power that was felt by all who lived under it.

Suddenly the carriage stopped with a jerk which threw Rama Rajah forward. The beggar had stopped in the middle of the road to receive alms brought out from a house in the street. The people who presented them made a request at the same time after the manner of a prayer for a certain benefit. As the Brahmin held out the little brass bowl to receive the offering he spat behind him in the direction of the carriage. A woman with a weakling child in her arms was passing. She instantly "made clay" and anointed the limbs of her little one with the precious ointment, continuing on her way in perfect faith and self-congratulation. Then the Brahmin moved to the side of the road with slow deliberate steps.

"You may pass," he said, looking at Rama Rajah directly.

He used the same mode of speech as the Assistant Collector had employed in addressing the syce, the form always used by the superior towards the inferior. There was nothing strange in what had occurred, nothing to excite the wonder of the passers-by. On the contrary the Vellalan had behaved with due decorum to the Brahmin in awaiting his pleasure and in not having attempted to force his way, an action which might have brought down a curse upon his head. Yet to Rama Rajah the incident was galling.

The recognition of this fact did not add to his peace of mind. His attitude towards the Brahmin was contrary to all the accepted teaching of his race. He ought to have congratulated himself on the encounter ; it was a piece of good fortune, and when the man stood aside, he passed him on the lucky side. Had the incident happened yesterday he would have met it more evenly, but somehow to-day matters were assuming a new aspect, and he was contemplating the practical working of caste rules with fresh vision, a vision that was not loyal to his birth and his nation. Within the short space of an hour his caste rules had caused him to assume an attitude of superiority towards a refined and educated native lady, his equal in every respect but birth, whilst he had had to submit to the contemptuous arrogance of an illiterate beggar who exhibited his contempt and superiority in a coarse uncultivated manner towards himself.

He did not attempt to ignore the situation. On the contrary, with that delicate perception which comes so easily to educated India, he acknowledged the source of his new critical mood. It was due to his renewed intercourse with Dolores. Since he had spoken with her, felt her touch upon his arm and come within the magic circle of her personal influence and sympathy, an insidious spirit of criticism had taken possession of him. Unconsciously he was viewing his own practical life from her point, measuring the everyday customs of his country by her standard, and finding them lamentably wanting. For the first time in his life he realized the enormous difference that existed between the teaching of the East and the West.

In the midst of his ruminations the carriage drew up under the portico of his own house. It was a large building with deep verandahs nearly surrounding it. Where the architect had omitted the verandah, it had been added in bamboo and palm leaf materials. Every opening was jealously screened with hanging blinds of rattan through which the inmates could see without being seen. It was possible to roll the blinds up, but this was seldom done except before the rooms occupied by the Assistant Collector. He required light for the transaction

of his business, and his long residence in England had made him dislike the darkened airless rooms so dear to the heart of all natives of India.

He glanced up at the house as the brougham approached the portico, and noted, with a little sigh of resignation to the inevitable, that every blind was down, though the sun would soon sink behind the horizon of trees. As he mounted the steps of the verandah he turned to speak to the coachman.

"Why are you not wearing the white clothes that I provided for you? You and the syce are not fit to be seen in those red rags."

The coachman made an obeisance as he replied, "The big mistress has locked up the new garments in her room, sir. They are to be kept, she says, until the time when his Excellency the Governor pays his visit to the town."

Rama Rajah paused a moment; then remembering the futility of pitting his authority against that of his mother, he entered the house without further remark. He would have passed straight into the room which was called his office, but a voice arrested his steps.

"My son!" cried the shrill tones of his mother. "Stay a moment; I have something to say. Whence this hurry? The house-dog runs to and fro with much barking, when he could better mind his business by lying peacefully on the threshold. You run after your work too much, my son, like the foolish Englishmen who rule us. Let your work run after you. Be sure that it will come to your feet as soon as the necessity arises for it to be done."

"What is it you want, mother?" he asked, when at length she stopped.

"Where have you been?" she inquired with some curiosity.

"To see the Collector."

She lifted her chin with a disdainful snort as she continued—

"Whilst you are young and but an Assistant you must attend on him. By-and-by, when you are the Collector,

matters will be changed and the Assistant will have to wait on your pleasure. May the gods send that he be a European. Then will we keep him waiting whilst his chief, the Collector, is bathing or eating, or at his devotions, or sleeping. 'His excellency dines and may not be disturbed ;' 'His honour sleeps and is not to be awakened.'"

The old lady laughed at the picture she drew.

"What did you want of me, mother ?" asked Rama Rajah, with difficulty controlling his impatience. He had listened to the same kind of anticipation on the part of various members of his family many times previously and had learned that it was best to keep silence.

"Many things, my son. First, tell me who will be chosen for the Munsif's appointment at Sivapet ?"

"How did you know that it was vacant ?" he asked, with a swift glance that was not free from certain suspicions.

"News flies quicker than the feet of a horse. The death of the late Munsif is known throughout the bazaar. To whom will the appointment go ?"

"It is not yet decided," he replied shortly.

"Our relative has been waiting patiently these four years for something good from your hands ; but you have been ever forgetful of those who have the strongest claim upon you. With your father's money your education was paid for. By his aid did you enter the service of the Sirkar. And now, when opportunity offers to repay him by bestowing gifts upon his family, you fail to render what is due."

They had moved into a room on the right which, in the establishment of an Englishman would have been the reception-room, and as such Rama Rajah regarded it. There was a round table in the centre ; sofa and chairs were placed with mathematical precision against the walls. A large bunch of artificial flowers stood in the middle of the table upon a woollen mat of brilliant colours, and this was the only ornament to be seen. The effect with the lowered blinds was dreary in the extreme and it never failed to strike Rama Rajah as he entered and passed through the room on his way to his office.

He took a seat on one of the chairs resigning himself to hear his mother out at once rather than have the interruption of her presence later when he wanted to write. One of the dependents of the house, guided by the sound of the voice of the mistress, entered with a bundle of soiled linen which she began to count out in unsightly heaps.

"What are you doing here with the dhoby's things? Take them away," said Rama Rajah, with some annoyance.

"Let them be," countermanded his mother, in a peremptory tone which he knew of old. "The clothes must be counted before me or half of them will be stolen. Proceed with your work," she concluded, addressing the woman imperiously.

During this little interlude Rama Rajah had risen with the intention of escaping to his room. His mother caught him by the arm.

"Sit down again, my son. I must learn more about this Munsif's post. There is the late Munsif's family." She paused and looked sharply into his face for information, but he was silent. She enumerated the different candidates with a running commentary upon their merits and demerits, showing a remarkable knowledge of the circumstances of the vacant appointment. Then she pressed Rama Rajah to tell her who was likely to obtain the coveted post. But he resisted all her entreaties and repeated more than once that nothing was settled at present. He knew too well why the information was so much desired, and he had no intention of putting temptation in her way.

"Is that all you desire to ask?" he said. "I must not be idle. There is an accumulation of work awaiting me on my office table."

"No, my son, that is not all. Ah, stupid! you have put one of the lamp-cloths with the young master's handkerchiefs. Count them over again." After a momentary pause during which she devoted all her attention to the woman she said, "I want to speak to you about your marriage."

"Another time will be more convenient," he answered, as he glanced at their companion.

"For you, perhaps, but not for me. Dah! Bring me a chair."

This last was addressed to the woman who was knotting up the corners of the soiled sheet that contained the clothes. The order was executed, and Rama Rajah's mother seated herself, not with a view of adding to her comfort, for she was not used to sitting upon chairs, but she imagined that she would thus convey to her son's mind the importance of the discussion. Rama Rajah was unwilling to speak of a matter before a dependent that was in his opinion of a personal and private nature.

"Come into my room and we will talk it over there," he proposed.

"Why will it not do here? You need not fear her. Is she not one of the family, the widow of my uncle's son? Shuh! she is of no more importance than the squirrel in the verandah and not a quarter so talkative. Sit down, my son, sit down and let me rest too, whilst I watch this foolish person make up the bundle for the dhoby."

Much against his will he sank into the chair again and resigned himself to listen.

"We have received a letter this very day from one, Vencata, of our caste, a man owning land in Tinnevelly, who offers his daughter. She is twelve years old, a fine well-grown girl, comely in appearance and peaceable in her temper. It seems to your father and myself that she will be most suitable. The demands of Vencata are ridiculous, but they can be lessened. The tiger roars for a great deal more than he is contented to take. Your father has written to say that we will think about the matter but that we have other designs for you elsewhere. This will show him that we are not begging for his daughter."

"Listen, mother. You and my father have been good to me, and I acknowledge my indebtedness. I would not willingly cross you; nor give offence by refusing to consent to all that you propose for the welfare of the family. But in this case I must speak. I do not desire a second wife. I am satisfied with the wife you have already given me."

"But I am not ; your father is not ; the whole family is dissatisfied," rapped out the old lady sharply, as she twitched impatiently at the folds of her rich silken cloth.

"What does my wife say ?"

"What can she say,—she, a childless woman ? Often she falls into my arms with passionate tears, crying that the gods are cruel, and saying that I must look to another woman to give me that greatest of all gifts for the aged, a son's son. My heart aches for her, and our tears mingle, but matters do not mend. We have made pilgrimages to the temple of Srirangam and Chidumbaram together, and we have worshipped at the big temple here—thou knowest, beloved son ! thou knowest !"

She bowed her head and the tears fell. The enslaved widow wept in sympathy as she waited unnoticed for her orders.

"Yes, I understand," murmured the Assistant Collector.

"And yet no child has been vouchsafed. At his last visit the aged guru promised that our prayers should be heard. But he died soon after and the gods have forgotten us. His successor we have not yet seen. Your father has written to him to ask if we shall not do well to provide you with another wife."

"The house is full enough as it is," remarked Rama Rajah, with rebellion echoing in his tone.

She turned upon him with a flash of anger.

"Ay, indeed ! and whose fault is it that we are crowded like a chutram on a feast day ? If you would repeat constantly your request to be transferred to the Tinnevelly district, Government would grant it. There we should be able to live on our own property with more houseroom. And how good it would be to go there ! What wealth might we not accumulate with yourself as Assistant Collector ! What favours could you not grant to our many relatives ! In time nearly every post worth having might be in the hands of one or other of our relations. Many of them would pay well, too, for your favour."

The dhoby's bundle was made up and the mistress signed to the broken-spirited widow to take it away. Rama Rajah rose.

"I will think over Vencata's proposal," he conceded, hoping thus to satisfy her. But she knew her son too well to be put off in that manner. He had a will of his own, as she had discovered long ago, and was not to be driven. He was only temporizing when he promised to consider the question. She broke out angrily.

"Ay! ay! think it over! Too well I understand what that means."

At this moment Doraswamy, her husband, strolled in from the street. His wife's impatient tones and his son's flashing eye told him without further explanation that pressure was being put upon an unwilling horse. It had occurred to his mind more than once that the Assistant Collector, with his independent income and his Western notions, might some day shake off a yoke that galled him too severely. He thought it wise to seize the opportunity of sounding a note of warning.

"Hallo, wife, ever grumbling at the boy! Take care that you do not grumble him altogether into the arms of his adopted mother, the British Sirkar. She will worry him less because she will neither pet nor scold him nor ask him to grant favours."

"He has disappointed me again. He refuses all my requests; and now that we are willing to go to the trouble and expense of procuring another wife for him, he turns away displeased," she complained. "Was there ever a man in this world who found a second wife distasteful when the first had proved barren? Truly his English education has filled his head with foolishness."

"Mother, you ask impossible things of me," cried Rama Rajah, distressed at the sight of his mother's tears. "I have told you that I will think over the question of a second marriage. As for your other requests, you sent me to England where they tried to teach me to act as an Englishman. If you

had wished me to follow the old pathway you should have kept me with you. As it is I desire to be worthy of my trust, and I will not sell my patronage. The man who is most worthy shall have the appointment."

"Most worthy!" she exclaimed in mocking tones. "Is one more worthy than another in this land! Is not worthiness another term for cleverness? Why should you not appoint our relative to the vacant post of Munsif? Give it to him, my son," she pleaded in softening entreaty, "and the blessing of the whole family will rest upon you."

"I cannot," he replied, gently but firmly. "I am only following the example of the Englishmen who fill such appointments as I hold. They do not promote their relations."

Doraswamy, who had been an amused listener, laughed as he remarked—

"The monkey can be very virtuous in a garden where there are no nuts. We know not what the Englishman might do if he had his relations living around him and under his own roof."

His wife left the room, a fold of her cloth pressed to her eyes. Rama Rajah looked after her with regret but with no sign of yielding, and turning to his philosophical father, asked :

"How am I to please my mother and do my duty to Government?"

"My boy, the river can only run down one channel if it is to remain swift and strong."

"And which channel is best?"

"That is known only to the river itself; it alone can choose."

"My mother's entreaties make the choice difficult. She clamours to get her own way against my judgment."

"Women are like bells; they make much noise, whether it is to call a hundred thousand worshippers to the yearly feast at the temple or whether it is merely to let the temple poojari know that it is time to pour fresh oil into the lamp before the

idol. Therefore it is a mistake to pay too much attention to their voices."

"But there is my mother's anger."

"It is like the crimson in the sunset sky and will pass. My son, if the bullocks stopped every time the wheels shrieked they would never get to their journey's end."

CHAPTER VI

THE FIRST WIFE

RAMA RAJAH retired to his sitting-room where a pile of official papers on his writing-table awaited his attention. The apartment, which could be entered from the reception room, opened into a side verandah. Here the Government peons sat during the day, in readiness to receive their orders and go on messages connected with their master's business. Besides the writing-table and revolving seat, the room contained a small round dining-table, a dinner-waggon, and a few chairs. This furniture was a concession unwillingly accorded by his mother. She declared such innovations to be highly ridiculous and not conducive to the maintenance of his caste and his dignity; she tried in vain to persuade him to give them up, but he was firm in his refusal. So his meals were served upon a white table-cloth, and he ate his food with knife, fork, and spoon in English fashion, whilst his family, including his wife, partook of theirs in another room seated on the floor, dipping their fingers into their plates as their ancestors had done for generations before them.

The appearance of the house throughout bore evidence of competence if not of actual wealth, but it was in Hindu fashion. To the European eye it would have seemed a curious mixture of extravagant and penurious taste. There was no scheme of colour nor of arrangement in any one of the rooms. Curtains of thick material hung where they were actually required to screen doorways and windows. The floors were matted with fine grass matting, and some handsome rugs were thrown carelessly about with satin and chintz pillows, regardless of any

decorative design. Equally incongruous, except in Rama Rajah's room, was the furniture, a table or cabinet, a settee or highly ornamental pier-glass being placed here and there without method. Evidence of the housemaid's brush there was none, nor of the delicate touch of the lady's hand which is so marked in the English home.

Besides Rama Rajah, his father and mother and wife, there were other relations of at least three generations living under the same roof, uncles, cousins, aunts, and several individuals who were relatives of relatives but otherwise not connected with the master of the house and his son. Those who were poor gave honourable service in some domestic capacity or other, cooking, cleaning—when any cleaning was done, which was not often—tending the fowls, marketing, and, most of all, bringing gossiping tales to amuse the great ones and so find momentary favour in their eyes.

Doraswamy's wife, whose word was law throughout the whole establishment, did nothing but keep a watchful eye upon what was going on. She issued arbitrary and often capricious but not ill-natured mandates to all alike from her husband down to the smallest urchin in the wash-house. In this she was assisted by Lukshmi, the spoilt beauty of her father's house and now a disappointed beauty in her husband's family. Having a full share of shrewdness, she quickly discovered on her marriage that it would be to her advantage to propitiate her mother-in-law. To fascinate and to charm was as the breath of life to her; wherein she differed in no way from the beauties of other nations. So she set herself with a will to ingratiate herself, and was successful with one exception.

Had the family been poor she would have had no time to exercise her wiles upon any of its members, but would have been obliged to put her hand to housework. But in Doraswamy's domestic circle there were plenty of people to do all that was required and Lukshmi lived in opulent ease. When she had finished her toilet and fastened upon her soft rounded arms and delicate ankles all the gold and silver ornaments which it pleased her to wear, when she had pushed a ball of

sweet jasmin blossom into the glossy black strands of her scented hair, fixed the gold boss at the back of her head, clasped the necklaces of pearl, emerald, and gold upon her neck, and when finally she had touched her lips and eyes, she had finished her occupation for the day. There remained only the eating and sleeping and the gossiping with an occasional drive.

But Lukshmi did not care much for the drive. To be shut up in a close carriage and whirled along a dusty road, even though there were no restrictions placed on staring out of the window, possessed no charm for her. The sights that met her eye were devoid of excitement and the journey was purposeless. It was infinitely more amusing to remain in the busy household, and to question the women who had been to market, and the peons as they returned from their errands, to listen to the complaints and petitions of the men who came in from the district with the purpose of obtaining the ear of the Assistant Collector with requests for special favours.

Whatever suspicions Rama Rajah might have had, he was carefully kept in ignorance of the little comedies and tragedies which were sometimes enacted in the verandah on the side of the house opposite to his room, a verandah where the blinds were always kept lowered. The women's apartments opened upon this verandah, and they were further screened by a thick hedge of Mysore thorn, trained some eight feet high with only a narrow path between the hedge and the verandah steps.

Here sat the mother and wife of the Assistant Collector listening to strange stories and still stranger requests. Here they made promises in his name, and sold the favours which he was endeavouring to bestow impartially upon those who seemed most worthy.

At the end of each audience, a jewelled arm was extended and a small palm was held out into which were dropped offerings, some great and some small. Nothing came amiss from the pice to the gold mohore. And if the suppliants returned with subsequent expressions of disappointment and reproach, the complainant was given to understand that his rival had

been more generous. Surely it was easy to understand that the coveted post always went to the highest bidder. The gift so barren of result was not restored, but a promise was made that it would be remembered when next there was an occasion to bring an offering. So the grumbler departed, partially appeased by indefinite promises of future benefits—which might be his—provided always that he was able to outbid others. Then, when the fortunate candidate entered on his new sphere, he took care to repay himself the outlay incurred in securing the post. There were many of these minor appointments in the gift of the Assistant Collector, and on the whole there was general satisfaction in the disposal of them. This was due to the old lady's diplomacy. She was never guilty of permitting the unsuccessful candidate to outbid the man whom her son had chosen. The strangest part of it was the willingness of the successful one to be squeezed to the fullest extent. So foreign to all tradition was the impartial distribution of favours, that the recipient accepted the imposition as a matter of custom, and never dreamed of exposing the practice as long as the game was played fairly.

While Rama Rajah looked through his letters, his mother was seated in the twilight listening to the pleading of a member of the Tahsildar's family.

“It is useless; I cannot get you the post for so small a sum,” said the voice of the old lady behind the bamboo blind. Through it she could dimly discern the outline of the figure of the applicant against the green hedge, whilst he could distinguish nothing.

“I have given all that I can spare; I am but a poor man, most honourable lady.”

“The Munsif's brother brought a greater gift, so what could I do? In consideration it was but right to speak to my son in his favour,” replied the mother of the Assistant Collector, having shrewdly guessed at her son's intentions.

“Can you not say something also in my favour, oh mother of the universe?” pleaded the man with an insinuating manner which was flattering but not effectual.

"It might be possible if I were so inclined," replied the old lady, with an assumption of power that impressed her hearer. "But why should the hand be held out to help when the palm is empty?"

"Not quite empty, gracious lady. If you will extend it once more, I will do my best to outweigh the man you have favoured."

The blind was drawn back sufficiently to allow an arm to be gently moved towards the speaker. There was a gleam of gold in the twilight and a bangle was dropped into the palm. After some moments of suspense the bangle was passed back again and thrust upon the unwilling donor. Lukshmi who had been a silent witness of the scene sighed. The bracelet was of solid gold with an emerald set in the middle. She had nothing like it among all her treasures, and her greedy self-indulgent little soul coveted it. She made a sign to her mother-in-law to keep the jewel, but Doraswamy's wife replied with a gesture of dissent.

"You are too late; the promise has been given and the business is on the point of being concluded. It is a pity that you did not come this morning; then we might have arranged it. Take back your jewel. The small sum of money you brought yesterday I will keep, that I may remember you on the next occasion when favours are to be dispensed by my son. Go, you need not remain longer."

With these words she turned away from the blind, and the man knew that it was useless to plead any more. But like all Orientals, he did not take his departure immediately. There was no hurry, and the lady might think better of her decision half an hour hence. So he moved to the vicinity of the out-houses and sat down under a tree to wait.

"Why did you not take the bangle, mother? It is just what I have been wanting," said Lukshmi, as soon as the man had disappeared.

"It came too late. Moreover, I have discovered that my son intends to appoint the brother of the late Munsif. We can do no more in this matter so we will think of another.

To-morrow we should have the people coming to us about the abatement of the tax upon their crops. It has been a dry season, and there will be reductions. Daughter, you must find out which part of the district my son thinks has suffered most. Power without knowledge is like a stick in the hand of the blind. Bah ! child ! you are always eating sweets or chewing betel ! Was ever such a greedy girl ! You are not listening to what I say. Seek your husband, by-and-by, and find out where favours will be showered."

With this speech the old lady left the room to go to the back of the house, where the cows were being milked under the supervision of one of the numerous relatives.

Lukshmi remained seated by the lowered blind. Through it she could see the primrose light in the sunset sky, with the films of crimson vapour and the black specks of the homeward flying rooks and crows. Her mind was occupied with herself and her own affairs, and she was utterly indifferent to the beauties of nature. The one trouble of her life was ever present, her childlessness. To the European woman such a condition may lead to some unhappiness ; but to the Hindu it is nothing less than calamitous. It is failure in the completion of life, an imperfection equivalent to the loss of a limb or of one of the senses, an involuntary crime. And the consciousness of failure weighs heavily and brings with it a sense of disgrace. There is also a feeling of injustice, for though the woman is always blamed, who can say if the fault be with her ? This injustice was rankling in the mind of the young wife, as she thought of the step proposed by her mother-in-law for remedying the want of an heir. She sat there endeavouring to console herself with pandering to her tastes for eating and self-adornment, and tried to forget her sorrow by concentrating her thoughts upon the rejected bangle.

The light was fading in the western sky with the rapidity of the tropics, and the room grew dark with its blinds and the hedge outside. A word spoken low fell on her ear.

"Lady, lady, will you not consider my prayer and accept my offering ?"

It was the applicant who had been rejected by her mother-in-law. A sudden suggestion shot through her brain like the whisper of a tempter. She touched the blind causing it to shake. The movement did not escape the watchful eyes outside, and in another moment the man had crept up the steps towards the spot where he had seen the fingers grasp the blind.

Rama Rajah lifted his eyes from the papers he was conscientiously perusing, drew a deep sigh and rose from his chair, as the attendant entered to lay the cloth for dinner. He had removed his turban, exposing his short hair. This fashion of wearing the hair like a European was another subject of dispute between himself and his mother, and the object of scorn on the part of his wife. But though he had complied with their wishes regarding the restoration of his caste according to the prescribed rules, in matters of less importance, such as the wearing of his hair and certain garments, the use of European furniture, the taking of his meals after the manner of the English, he had been firm to obstinacy, resisting entreaty and abuse alike.

As he seated himself at his solitary dinner, his muslin scarf thrown aside with the turban, he looked more like the Rama Rajah of Maidenhead days than when he presented himself at the house of the Collector. But the face no longer wore the reposeful expression which had accorded so well with the pleasant voice. There were fresh lines about the mouth, the brow was beginning to contract an habitual frown, and his eyes were clouded with care. The anxiety was borne of the attempt to do the work of an Englishman, in the spirit of an Englishman, when fate had made him the son of Hindu parents. As well might the graceful deer of the forest, with its agility to pass through the sinuous paths of the jungle, try to pace along the metalled highway, like the iron-shod horse drawing its load behind it. Weariness and despondency were the result of his labours. When he was most conscious of his own disinterestedness, his own integrity, he was most alive to the conviction that his efforts failed. Although he did not see

and hear what went on in that verandah on the other side of the house, though he was often ignorant of the visits that were paid, he had occasion to suspect that he was forestalled and circumvented. He chafed at the existence of evils upon which he could not lay his finger. The victims themselves assisted by keeping their secrets. They were content as long as fair play in accordance with *marmool*—custom—was observed. If there had been any unfairness of dealing, if favours had not been obtained by the highest bidders, the voice of complaint would assuredly have reached the ears of the Assistant Collector, and possibly of the chief civilian himself.

But as has been already stated, the mother of Rama Rajah took care to be well informed before she sold favours, concessions, appointments, and Government benefits. She was largely assisted in gaining this information by her daughter-in-law. Sometimes Doraswamy himself was of use. But her husband generally stood aside in self-indulgent indifference, and did not interfere, content to have his material needs ministered to by the numerous women of his house.

The attendant who waited on Rama Rajah was one of the many connexions housed and fed by his father. Jaganath had been educated at a high school, and at one time had hopes of qualifying for a subordinate post under Government. But the examination proved too much for him, and he failed. He was not physically strong enough to work on his relation's estate in Tinnevelly. Moreover, his education had unfitted him for tending cattle, plucking cotton, and planting rice. He arrived one day uninvited on an indefinite visit, and Doraswamy had given him a casual welcome. It was just as the family had settled at Madura, on the appointment of Rama Rajah as Assistant Collector, and Jaganath soon found his vocation in personal service to the civilian. The service proved acceptable, the young man being silent and unobtrusive, and above all things, willing to carry out Rama Rajah's wishes. The staple article of food for lunch and dinner was curry and rice, such as the rest of the family ate. But Jaganath set it before his patron in European fashion upon the white table-

cloth, and made no depreciatory comments on the way in which it was partaken with spoon and fork. As Jaganath removed the cloth and placed a box of cigars within reach, Rama Rajah asked—

“ Little brother, have there been many people to the house to see me since I have been away in the district ? ”

“ Only those who are interested in the appointment of the new Munsif at Sivapet.”

“ They brought the written applications that are lying on my table.”

“ That was so.”

“ Did they speak with any of the household ? ”

“ Our lady mother was gracious and granted them speech with her.”

Jaganath regarded his relative for a few seconds as though he would have said more had there been further questions, but it was not his custom to volunteer any information. He was aware that Rama Rajah preferred silence until he asked for speech. The opportunity for putting any questions ended abruptly with a tinkle of bangles outside the screen doors, that shut the room off from the central reception-room. On hearing the sound Jaganath hastened to depart by way of the verandah to the small pantry at the end of it, where the private service of crockery and glass used by Rama Rajah was kept.

“ Husband, may thy slave enter ? ”

“ Come in,” replied Rama Rajah. The answer was given in the same musical voice so beloved by Dolores, but it held no special tenderness and showed no sign that the pulse had stirred as the permission was accorded.

A tiny hand unfastened the latch, and Lukshmi entered, a pretty consciousness in place of shyness upon her regular features, a dancing light of mischief and daring in her eye, and the confidence of manner that marks beauty in all lands.

“ Has my lord an ear for a little one, and time to listen to her prattle ? ” Without waiting for his reply she continued. “ Even the elephant listens to the song of the small bamboo bird when the evening meal is finished ; and the tiger watches

the flight of the butterfly about his head without anger. May I speak, Excellency?"

He turned to her, beguiled into a smile of amusement, and not altogether indifferent to her pert humility.

"What is it that you have to say? Am I to ask pardon of our mother for your desertion of her in my favour?"

"See what I have dared for your sake! But no, it will not be necessary to ask pardon of her who rules the house, even as I, your wife, will some day rule it. It is of my lord that pardon must be asked for daring to venture into his office."

"It is granted readily. Do I not always grant your requests, little one? Truly you are the spoilt child of the family."

Though he spoke with a certain softness there was no answering light in his eye as it met hers. She bit her lip and looked away. The knowledge that she had failed to captivate his heart was bound up with that other crowning disappointment of her life. If only he would lose his temper instead of observing this calm, gentle tone. If he would fly into a rage with her, beat her, so that she might scratch and bite and scream out invectives, foremost of which would be the accusation that it was upon him and not upon her that the gods frowned in withholding their gifts, she would have been better pleased. But that even tenderness, that unruffled sweetness, that mild regard, often wandering and inattentive, maddened her. Her bosom heaved under the soft silken cloth with which she had draped her fully developed figure.

She controlled herself with a determination that was strong for so small a person. She had had her lesson. On several former occasions when she had given way to emotion, storming at him with mingled reproach and entreaty, she had realized that it was a false step. A look of weariness and disgust had come over his face, and he had been repelled rather than attracted by the display. Finally, he had left her with abruptness, commanding her to exercise more self-control, and calling some of the women to her assistance as though he were dealing

with a fractious child. She raised her eyes to his, her head bent down over her arm on which was a fine gold bangle. As she played with the jewel, she remarked—

“The time has seemed long and dull since my lord has been away in camp.”

She allowed a charming little sigh to escape her lips, and let her eyes drop upon the gold ornament.

“I have much business to transact in the district, and cannot take you with me, if that is what you would say.”

“The big Collector gentleman’s wife goes with him,” she pouted, with her full tempting lips.

He took no notice of the mouth which might have turned many a man’s thoughts from business to matters more personal.

“The Collector’s wife has no mother-in-law to say that she shall stay at home,” answered Rama Rajah. “That is a new bangle fresh from the hands of the jeweller. Where did you get it?”

“From the mother.”

“And how did she come by it?”

“She had it made by the goldsmith.”

His keen glance rested on her for a moment as his thoughts flew swiftly to the visitors who called to leave their petitions in person. At the same time he knew his mother’s fondness for accumulating jewellery of all sorts, and this bangle seemed to be of too handsome a kind for an ingratiating present from an applicant. He put the thought aside and merely remarked—

“If you want new bangles why not ask me?”

“Gifts asked for are leaden. Gifts bestowed unexpectedly are golden. But since you do not admire it I will return it to our mother and wear other bangles.”

She spoke with an assumption of indifference which she was far from feeling. She would have preferred a little violence on his part, an arbitrary command—which she might disobey; the wresting of the jewel from her arm by force—which she might resist; and above all, the abuse of herself—which might be returned with interest. She seated herself at his feet upon a

low stool, and watched him as the blue smoke issued from his lips.

"Did my lord find the country suffering much from the drought?" she asked.

"In places it has been severe."

"Then the crops will doubtless be short."

"Not everywhere, I am glad to say, so that it will not amount to a general famine."

"I hear that round Sivapet," she continued, "the land will only yield half the usual crop. His Excellency, the Assistant Collector will have to be merciful in the name of the Sirkar."

"Truly so, little one," replied Rama Rajah, who was pleased at the interest she showed in his work.

"And the lands beyond Sivapet, round the low hills?"

"They are not so bad. Some showers of rain fell there which did not reach Sivapet. Still even there the crops are not as good as they ought to be, and the harvest will be poor."

This was sufficient for the mother's purpose, and she lightly turned the conversation.

"My lord visited the Collector to-day. There are visitors at the house, and one of them is an English lady."

"There are two English ladies. The younger is the daughter of my old tutor. For nine years I was as a son in his house, and she was my sister, my kind, good, elder sister, though she is only a little older than I am; and now she is my friend."

Lukshmi glanced at him through her long eyelashes. "The ways of the English are strange. A young man may talk with a young woman who is no relation and call her sister. Is it not to be seen every day at the place where they play ball? I was never allowed to call any one who was not of my family brother."

"It is a pity that you were not sent to England."

Something in his expression as he gazed down upon her from his armchair roused her into sudden anger, and she replied stormily—

"I, indeed ! It is not for high-caste ladies like myself to cross the water."

"The wife of the Rajah of Tripatore has just gone to England, taking her two daughters with her to be educated."

"And what is she but potter's caste ! Let her go with all the Pariahs who care to accompany her !" cried the scornful beauty, with a toss of the head.

"Nay, my wife ; she is not a Pariah. It is not good to speak slightlying of others in that manner ; if you had had any education at all you would know better than to talk as you do. You cannot even read or write."

Her ungoverned temper rose instantly, not so much at the reproof as at the last statement, which appeared to her mind an accusation.

"Ab, I hate you, husband ! England deadened you, or you would never scold your wife like that ! Education has been the ruin of you ; it has killed the manhood in you and made you a machine to govern the land ! Awake, my lord, awake ! Call upon the gods to give you back the fire of life. Cry to them in their temples which you neglect, and tell them that they have forgotten you and have left you dead ! dead ! dead !"

She struck him lightly on the knee with each exclamation to emphasize her words, which were daring and bold on the part of a wife towards a Hindu husband. But Rama Rajah was not like the ordinary Hindu husband. From the very first moment he had endeavoured to make a companion of his wife after the manner of the English, and had permitted more liberty of speech than was customary. His mother whilst she smiled sceptically at every attempt at reform on his part, had not discouraged this particular one, as she found in it a means of obtaining information which she was unable to extract from her son in any other way.

Rama Rajah gazed at his wife in perturbation, untouched by the appeal in her burning eyes, and only half comprehending that which underlay her every word and action. Her hot impetuous nature demanded uxorious passion. When he sought his work in the office she would have had him clamouring at

the door of the zenana for the companionship of his wife with no thought but the delight of the moment's trifling. Instead of which he was self-controlled, and he regulated his life on the lines of an Englishman. Moderate in all his actions, he wasted no more time and thought upon his wife than upon his meals. He was always accessible to her, and she had the liberty of seeking him in his sitting-room whenever she chose. But whether he was busy or idle, she never succeeded in rousing that tempest of emotion her turbulent soul desired. There was another source of discontent. The disappointment that embittered her life did not touch him. The paternal instinct was dormant, and for the present his mind was fully occupied with the responsibilities of his work. While she fretted her passionate heart out vainly striving to communicate to him some of her own longing, he was regretting that she was unable to give him that sympathy and friendship which he had learned to expect from Dolores. What he required was vivifying draughts from the fount of intellectual sympathetic affection. What she craved for with the intense passion of the feminine heart common to the Eastern world, was the immortal gift of maternity, a gift which, if he were in sympathy with it, would compel the gods to grant her prayer. It was his indifference which caused them to withhold the gift and keep her barren. Yet he was not without pity for her, as well as for his mother, in their deep disappointment.

"Some day before long, little one," he said soothingly, after a pause, "I will make a pilgrimage with you to some temple where your offerings and prayers may perhaps find favour. I will ask for three months' privilege-leave, so that we may have ample time."

Her eyes were dried at his words, and the lips smiled with delight as he talked of what he would do, and how they would go away by themselves, camping on the road and visiting some remote temple scarcely known. Perchance they might catch the ear of the god. He knew what consolation the women of his nation found in pilgrimages ; and though his own faith was broken in their efficacy he had no desire to undermine the

faith of his wife. It was good for her to believe, for it gave her hope.

"You must come and see that English lady who is the guest of the Collector," he said presently.

She sprang up like a graceful cheetah suddenly roused. "No, no, no, I will not!" she cried, with childish petulance.

"Then she shall come here and see you."

"She shall not! I will not see her! I hate her! I know all about her! She is blind; and who can tolerate one that is blind? She is only fit to sit behind the kitchen door and grind curry-stuff, or pound rice, like a widow."

Her words hurt him, and he rose with an unusual wrath upon his countenance.

"Silence, woman! you speak like a babe without the excuse for a babe's foolish talk."

At this fear mastered her anger, and she controlled herself, continuing more temperately, but not without considerable emotion—

"Did I not rightly say that you were dead? Listen, my lord. I ask you what our mother would say if I paid a visit to one who had made a friend and companion of a low-caste Shanar girl? It is very well known that Veerama, the daughter of Sobraon Rao, the tobacco merchant, and sister of Desika Badra, is living constantly in the company of your English friend. You may speak with Desika Badra on the pial, in the congress hall and street, or even in your own verandah; but the women of the higher castes do not make friends with women of the lower. Nor will I, your wife, make a friend of the Shanar girl; and honour her and degrade myself by visiting her."

"I do not ask you to do that. It is the English lady whom I wish you to meet," he answered coldly.

"How can one speak with the herdsman without smelling his cattle? Nay, I am right, and the mother will also say the same, that it is not good for us to receive the English lady."

Rama Rajah caught his breath in a weary sigh. The constant disputation of his wife filled him with irritable distaste for her society, and roused that sensation of disappointment

against which he struggled in vain. Laying down the end of his cigar, he said—

“There is no need to decide the matter now. It is time that I got to work again. I have still a couple of hours' writing before me.”

She understood that he had uttered the word of dismissal in his annoyance, and she looked at him with pleading eyes bright with a sudden moisture. Her lips parted, and she lifted her hands towards him.

“Husband! my lord! I am but a slave under your feet! Do not be angry with me. All day long I think of you, and long for the hours of the night when you cannot work and we may be together.”

The words struck no chord within his breast. He had been treated to too many of these emotional scenes, which were part of life, and only natural to a temperament like that of Lukshmi.

“I forgive you, little one, and your childish talk. Go in peace.”

For the space of ten seconds she stood motionless. This was not what she wanted. He misunderstood; he called her a child, and she was a woman, with all a woman's instincts and desires strong upon her. She approached and fell at his feet, clasping her nervous arms round his knees. He felt her small lithe body pulsing with passion as she leaned against him, and poured out excuses and prayers for forgiveness.

“My lord, if the mother permits, I will meet the English lady. Do not bid me leave you like a naughty child. There are other matters to speak of.”

“I know what you would say. My mother has already made mention of it. She would have me marry another wife.”

His eyes met hers with an inquiring gaze. She drew herself back as she returned it. Then, looking down, she murmured in a stifled voice—

“She is younger than I am by seven years. She will be as a sister.”

“Do you wish it?” he demanded, leaning towards her.

Her head drooped lower and she covered her eyes with her hands.

"The mother has decreed it. What can I say? I, whom the gods have forgotten."

"Take heart, little one, take courage and we will not consent if it is not your desire. You are young and you may yet be favoured. If I am satisfied why should we make any change?"

"It is your mother; she is not satisfied."

"Let her not be impatient. We will make the pilgrimage as soon as I can get leave."

"But it may not be successful," she whispered, glancing at him through her tear-bedewed lashes.

"Then I can reconsider the question."

There was a pause, during which he was plunged in deep thought, from which she roused him by saying—

"And in that case you will take the girl your mother has chosen?"

"I think not; I shall probably claim the right to choose for myself."

His words fired her jealousy into a sudden flame. She drew away from him and rose, shaking out the folds of her silken draperies. The gold ornaments chinked and the silver anklets tinkled as she struck the ground with her feet in her restless movements. He looked at her in mild surprise, asking what had disturbed her.

"I thought I heard the sound of the tom-tom. Our mother has brought Seeta, the dancing girl, from the temple to stay with us for a while."

Rama Rajah frowned as he remarked, "Inviting a dasi into the house is like asking the snake to be a guest."

"She has done it to amuse your father and make him happy. Seeta is to dance before him this evening. The whole house will look on. Do not frown, my lord. It is by these means that your mother saves herself the necessity of seeking another wife for him. Will you not come and see the girl dance? She is one of the cleverest dasis of the temple, and our mother has given a rich gift for the honour."

"I have my work to do, as I have already told you. If the English lady invites you, little one, will you go?" he asked as she turned to leave the room.

She stopped and looked back at him, noting the expression of eager hope that shone in his eye. She pouted and twisted the new bangle upon her arm, playing with the green stone embedded in the gold, and making it gleam in the light of the lamp. Glancing up at him with one of her rapid changes of mood she was a vision of seductive womanhood.

"To-morrow, perhaps my lord's slave will tell him," she replied with alluring coyness. "When does she ask me to go and see her?"

"The day is not fixed."

"If it be a lucky day, and if the Shanar girl be not present—"

"What then?"

"Then perhaps I will not go," she answered, with a light laugh.

The beat of the drum was distinctly audible, and Lukshmi sprang towards the door all eagerness to see the dancing, and to secure the pick of the sweetmeats which had been prepared for the spectators. For the moment her sorrows vanished and her tantrums were dispersed. Like most Hindu women, she was very emotional, easily moved to laughter or anger, now full of intense enjoyment, now overwhelmed with grief, her volatile nature swayed by the trifles of the moment. As the gleam of her white silk draperies disappeared through the folding screen doors, her husband recognized the fact that it was useless to expect anything more from such a creature than the complete duty of the Hindu woman, obedience and motherhood; and in these, it seemed, she was likely to fail.

CHAPTER VII

A MODERN REFORMER

THE train for Madura drew up in the station of Dindigul. The morning sun shone upon the great rock that broods in the centre of the town like a sleeping elephant carrying the desecrated and deserted temple upon its shoulder. In the far distance the Pulney Hills stood out against the clear sky in pale blue, the nearer spurs a deep blue-green with their dense forests covering them like a cloak.

A number of passengers entered the carriages, mostly of the third class. The impatient pushing crowd would barely allow the arrivals to alight, so eager were they to secure places. Two native gentlemen, with something of the same eagerness, took their seats in an empty first-class compartment. The dress of the elder was European in fashion except for the turban and muslin scarf, the same as worn by Rama Rajah. The other had on a native costume common to the South. A muslin cloth fell in stiff-starched folds from his waist and a white cotton coat covered his ample figure. His feet were pushed into shoes of native pattern and were innocent of any other covering. No sooner did he fall into one of the four fauteuils with which the saloon compartment was furnished than he removed his turban, loosened the knot of long hair left upon his shaven crown and began to comb it out.

"That was an excellent speech made by your son Desika Badra at the meeting of the Congress two days ago," remarked the traveller, who was unblushingly making his toilet.

He was a Shanar and was journeying with his fellow-caste-man to Madura. Sobraon Rao, the father of the young orator alluded to, smiled as he made answer—

“The roar of the young tiger does not always mean a kill.”

“But it may indicate the future. The lad was moved by the inspiring force lying in the inherent consciousness of belonging to a great country and to an ancient civilization, and he has spoken only that which is burning in all our hearts.”

“Whatever may have been his inspiration, I tell him that it is of no use biting until the teeth have grown.”

“The moment for biting has perhaps not arrived yet; but it will come. Meanwhile it is the duty of young Indians towards themselves, towards their posterity, and towards the sacred literature and hoary philosophies which they inherit, to speak out boldly and claim India for the Indians. It is time that we established our right to our inheritance, a priceless possession of more value than all the modern blessings of the West. The foreign power, under whose rule we groan, must prepare itself to restore to its rightful owners the patrimony it has misappropriated, and we look to such men as your son to tell our rulers the truth.”

“The protest of the worm has but little effect upon the ploughman who tills the land for the good of the community. His ploughshare is apt to cut it in two if it should be too bold.”

At that moment two English ladies with a child hurried along the platform closely followed by an ayah. Two native servants were in attendance, carrying hand-bags and a lunch-basket. The ladies stopped before the occupied compartment.

“There are two vacant seats here,” said the elder, looking in.

“If there were half a dozen seats vacant we could not travel with natives,” replied the other, not troubling to lower her voice whilst she cast a glance of open disgust at the man who was combing his hair.

“Surely there are separate carriages for Europeans on this train,” exclaimed the first who had spoken.

“There is not another vacant compartment first class. I have been the whole length of the train.”

“What are we to do? I must get on by this train, or I shall miss the bullock transit and my chair coolies.”

"Oblige these men to remove to a second-class carriage," suggested the other.

"You hear, Sobraon Rao, Nadan, how these foreigners would sweep us out of their path," said the knight of the comb in his own language. "Why should they not travel with us? They are served by Pariahs and so are no better in caste than their own servants. It should be for us to object to their presence. If they attempt to bring in one of those men who are handling their bags and lunch-basket so freely, I shall myself turn him out."

"The English ladies are right. We should not permit our wives and daughters to travel with two strange native gentlemen unescorted, and they have reason in refusing to do so themselves," rejoined Sobraon. Then, speaking in English, he continued, "Madam, if you will wait a minute I will have another carriage put on."

The English women turned with visible relief to the speaker, and one of them said—

"If you could manage it we should be very grateful. We have already made the request, but it has been refused."

He departed quickly, and presently returned accompanied by the station-master himself, who wore an anxious expression whilst Sobraon Rao talked.

"There you see are the necessary number of tickets to secure this compartment for the sole use of this gentleman and myself. You are now warranted in putting on another first-class carriage. As soon as it is attached these ladies will be glad to take their seats."

He displayed the requisite number of tickets and the railway official, who was a native, had no alternative but to comply with the request. Passenger trains in India run at long intervals of time and there was no question of the ladies waiting for the next.

"How did you contrive to bring about what we failed to do?" asked one of the ladies.

"I took more tickets."

"But the cost! You ought not to have to bear it. We must——"

"Madam, the money matters little. If you are pleased, then am I very glad indeed to have been of assistance."

He spoke with a strong accent. English did not flow from his tongue so readily as from the glib tongue of his son, although both he and his companion understood it. In the South the language is more generally learned and used by educated gentlemen than in the North.

"You are very good, and we thank you warmly. *You* have behaved like an English gentleman in our difficulty." She laid stress upon the pronoun which was not lost upon his companion. "May we know to whom we are indebted?"

"I am Sobraon Rao, Nadan, a merchant of Madura."

"The millionaire manufacturer of cigars," exclaimed the younger lady, in a low voice, her interest suddenly aroused.

"Your name is well known to us," said the other, continuing to address Sobraon Rao. "Not only have we seen it on the boxes of cigars in the smoking-room, but it is also familiar in connexion with the new hospital in Dindigul to which you have been a munificent donor. Sobraon Rao, Nadan, again we thank you."

There was a jolt indicative of the extra carriage being attached and the ladies hurried off, followed by their servants, to take their seats. In another minute the train moved out of the station.

"For one who is as wealthy as you are, Sobraon Rao, Nadan, you take too much trouble," remarked his companion, beginning to knot up the *kudumi* tail of coarse black hair. "For my part I despise the English. The impertinence! wanting us to turn out into a second-class carriage to make room for them!"

The merchant laughed as he replied, "Have we not been treating our own countrymen, the Pariahs, in a manner far more offensive for hundreds of years past? We have no right to complain when we are occasionally served in something of the same manner."

"You have some strange notions. As I despise the Pariahs, so I hold the English in contempt. I should be glad to see them swept out of the country, just as they would have swept us out of the carriage, had we permitted it."

"It will be a bad day for India when the English leave us," declared Sobraon Rao, as he settled himself in his cushioned seat. "They bring us peace, and with peace comes prosperity. One must not despise the bucket that brings the water up from the well."

Having arranged his hair to his satisfaction the other pulled out a paper and prepared himself to read out aloud what had been said at the meeting of congress. Sobraon's eyes rested upon the rich fields of tobacco that lay in the valley. Artificial irrigation had brought them to perfection, and they were a goodly sight to the merchant. Thanks to the rule of the British, his mind was at rest concerning the safety of his property. No horde of wild marauders could sweep down upon that fair country, raiding and destroying as they went. His plants were as safe from thieving fingers as if they were growing in the heart of the distant island that had brought peace and protection to the inhabitants of the great Eastern continent. A look of intense amusement came into his countenance as he listened to the high-pitched nasal voice of the reader, that dominated the rumbling of the train.

"We belong to a nation of peoples who in the morning of the world were singing sacred hymns and cultivating systems of philosophy which even now continue to evoke the admiration of the civilized world. At that period what was the condition of the nation whose yoke we bear, whose members batten upon our revenues? They were wandering as naked savages upon their native heaths in Great Britain. They were practising an idolatry of a most degrading form. They were steeped in barbaric ignorance. The time has come when the wrongs of India cry aloud for redress. A neighbouring nation has shown how progress is possible without sacrificing its noble traditions, its ancient dynasty and forms of government. The tide is with us. The people of England themselves are

beginning to understand the wrongs of India, as witness what the English papers print in their columns from the pens of visitors and correspondents charged with the sacred duty of revealing what they see and hear. All Asia is awakening. The isles of the East have set us an example, and have lifted the standard of progress and independence, and the great autocracy of the West is crumbling to dust. The moment has arrived when India may begin to work for her emancipation. Have we not created a national public opinion for ourselves? Are not the different provinces knit together in close bonds of sympathy whilst caste and creed separations hamper less and less the pursuit of common aims? Let us cling to our national customs and cast aside with scorn and contempt all Western innovations even down to the matter of dress and the wearing of the hair. Let us be thorough even in the most trivial details."

The reader paused, and his listener leaned back and laughed with genuine amusement.

"Nowadays a young man believes that his strength lies in his mouth," was his comment.

"But I tell you," cried the other excitedly, "that your son proclaims but the truth. We need reform if not actual revolution."

"What reforms would you have?" asked Sobraon.

"A larger share for the subject race in the administration of the Government; more Indians in the Civil Service."

"The Civil Service is open to all. My son went in for the examination—and failed. But Rama Rajah, Pillai, was successful. The door is open for those who have the courage and strength to mount the steps leading to it."

The advocate of reform took no notice of Sobraon's correction, but continued his catalogue.

"And more Indians on the Councils, especially the Council of the Secretary of State."

"Brahmins?" suggested Sobraon, with a twinkle of the eye.

The mere mention of the name of the twice-born was

sufficient to raise a storm of protest on the part of the other. The Brahmins already had the best of the subordinate appointments. They were a pushing class, overbearing and arrogant. If care was not taken they would fill every post before long, and turn all others of a lower caste out of office.

"Then whom would you desire to see on the Councils?" asked the tobacco merchant.

"There are plenty of others," replied his companion, vaguely.

"Men like Rama Rajah, Pillai?" queried Sobraon.

"He belongs to a bigoted family. The Vellalas, though they claim to be next the Brahmins, are, after all, only Sudras. No, my friend; we want such men to represent us as your son, the deliverer of this excellent speech."

"It is the young horse that upsets the coach. With regard to what you have been urging we must remember that in 1861 the Viceroy's Council as well as the Councils of Madras and Bombay were enlarged by the addition of native members. And in 1892 all the Councils were still further increased, and three new Councils have been subsequently created. As for two or three Indians on the Secretary of State's Council, is it to be believed that the presence of three men in that Council would turn the scales one way or the other in the determination of Indian questions?"

"If we sent men of weight, men who commanded the confidence of all classes of the Indian population, their influence would assuredly be felt," protested the reformer.

"All castes, you mean; not all classes," said Sobraon Rao. "Were it possible to find Indians with long official experience who commanded the confidence and respect of all castes, would they consent to leave their native land and be expatriated for the rest of their lives in England? I doubt it."

The advocate of reform glided away from the practical details of his scheme, and took refuge in the general question. He continued his catalogue.

"We also want a reduction of military expenditure."

The smile with which Sobraon had listened died away and

his face grew thoughtful. He asked, with an earnestness not before exhibited—

“ Could we stand alone against the aggression of a foreign power? Could we, with all the conflicting interests of the different classes and castes and creeds which inhabit so diversified a continent as we call India, keep peace within our borders?”

“ Of course we should need some protection if only to hold those supercilious Muhamadans under control,” admitted the other.

“ Ay, indeed! Take away the strong arm of Britain, or even weaken it, and what would become of your ‘united India’? The old drama would be re-enacted. There would be the same rivalries and jealousies among the different races; the same contention for mastery between Hindus and Muhamadans; between the Sunnis and the Shias, the high caste and the low; the same internal wars, the same oppression of the weak by the strong, with plunder and bloodshed. And amidst all this confusion there would be the Russians at our very gates.”

“ H’m, we don’t want them here.”

“ No, indeed! You call the English oppressors. At least they leave us our religions and our women. The Russian would molest both.”

“ A sufficient military force must, of course, be retained to oblige the enemy to keep his distance,” conceded the reformer, rather unwillingly.

The smile reappeared on the face of the merchant as he remarked—

“ In that case we cannot expect England to hold the horns of the cow while we draw the milk.”

“ For all that I maintain that India should be for the Indians. We do not want a yoke and a rod. It is sympathy and encouragement without interference that we require to assist us to live the life of our ancestors.”

“ Especially when we are treading down the Pariahs and trying to exterminate the Muhamadans as they did,” remarked the other, with good-natured cynicism.

"We could lead the simple noble life of our ancestors without committing their offences," protested his companion.

The merchant looked sceptical, but did not contradict the assertion.

"If you wish to live the simple life of the past, in all its simplicity, you will have to extinguish the new spirit of inquiry which is firing our Congress hot-heads; and that means putting an end to all Western teaching," he said.

"On the contrary, I would have education on Western lines with as much Western civilization as we could assimilate. But let us cling to the Hindu ideals which have been venerated for so many generations. Let us jealously retain our old religious and social institutions, but recognize the new progressive force at work in our midst. Let us enjoy our own inheritance, physical as well as spiritual. That is the cry of United Educated India."

Again Sobraon laughed. "United Educated India!" he repeated. "Eighty per cent. of the population of India are practically illiterate and uneducated, whilst the Hindu community, which is only a part of this great continent, is divided into castes too numerous to mention! Between the castes there is no cohesion. There can, therefore, be no national combination whilst the bitterness of caste continues. Some day we shall realize the great fact and remedy it. But until that day arrives a foreign power will rule us—not by the strength of its sword so much as by the strength of the caste divisions amongst us."

"It is well known that you are advanced in your theories on the subject of caste, Sobraon Rao, Nadan, and have shown it in the manner in which you have carried on the education of your family."

The transition from the general to the personal was rapid, and the speaker glanced at his companion with inquiry not unmixed with curiosity. He was aware that Sobraon Rao had sent his daughter as well as his son to England for education and that the daughter had been accompanied on her return by an English lady, a friend of the senior civilian. The disregard

of caste observances, even on the part of a Shanar, was a bold step to take, and Sobraon's companion had much to say on the subject if given the opportunity. But it was not etiquette to mention individual members of the family more than had already been done, unless Sobraon Rao himself took the initiative. This he did not choose to do. The tobacco merchant was too wary a man of the world to court criticism from a fellow-caste man. If criticism and reproof were due, they should come from the head of his caste, and be administered through the usual channel of the caste council or punchayet. Sobraon Rao, therefore, replied generally—

“It is necessary that the young people of the day should be prepared by education to adapt themselves to their altered circumstances.”

“But what about caste?”

“Iron will not become gold, however much it is heated. A Shanar is not a Brahmin, and in these progressive days we Shanars need not trouble ourselves too much about caste. Besides, I find that as leaves cover a tree so will riches cloak many deeds.”

The reformer fell back upon his general subject, and read aloud more extracts from the inflammatory speeches of other orators.

They arrived at Madura between twelve and one. The air was becoming warm and it was heavy with the scent of flowering trees. Pushing his way through the crowd like a young Rajah, came Desika accompanied by two attendants carrying ivory sticks in imitation of the followers of native royalty. Sobraon Rao with his strong vein of common-sense dispensed with all such display, but it pleased Desika; and, though his father smiled at the exhibition of pretentiousness and frequently indulged in cynical remarks at the expense of his son, the display was permitted without protest.

Desika, the advocate of the retention of the simple habits of his ancestors, was dressed in a cool suit of flannel of the latest English cut and pattern. His collar and tie were equally fashionable, and he wore his hair cropped like an

Englishman. Even the turban was dispensed with, and a red velvet cap took its place. Neither did he carry the muslin scarf across the shoulders, which had given a distinct oriental note to the costume of his father and Rama Rajah.

The words uttered by the young man in his speech still lingered in the mind of Sobraon, and there was an amused twinkle in his observant eye as he scanned the up-to-date appearance of his son. Desika extended his hand in English fashion in greeting to both men. Directing the attendants to look after the luggage, they stood on the platform conversing for a few minutes.

“How is the crop, father?” asked Desika.

“Excellent, my son, but it needs your presence at once.”

“This very evening I will start.” He turned to the other man. “Perhaps my father told you that he has been staying at Dindigul to look after my work there, whilst I have been employed in the interests of my country in Madras. We had a great gathering and a grand array of speakers. But none stirred the heart of the multitude as I did,” he concluded, with an attempt at modesty which was not successful. Pride percolated through his whole being like water through moss.

“I have been reading parts of your speech to your father on the way down. It is magnificent. Your words will echo to the very foot of England’s throne.”

“Did you like it, father?” asked the young orator, with pardonable anxiety.

“The tobacco leaf needs fermentation before a good cigar can be rolled. I hope that your platform talk will go towards making a man of you some day.”

One of the magnificent attendants approached and intimated that the luggage had been taken to the carriage; there was nothing more to wait for. He waved his ivory rod and began to clear a way through the crowded platform. A group of Pariahs had seated themselves on the ground and were chattering excitedly over a bundle of miscellaneous property that had burst through the old sheet in which it had been tied. Desika signed to the stick-in-waiting to remove the obstructing

travellers, which was promptly effected, the Pariahs being driven up against the wall of the station so that their shadows should not fall upon the caste people who were desirous of passing. Again Sobraon smiled.

"Educated united India," he said as he contemplated the cringing apologetic Pariahs. They made humble salaams the moment they caught his glance, as though they asked pardon for daring to exist at all. "Is it possible to educate the buffalo and unite his interests with those of the elephant? They share the country between them, but the buffalo works the harder although the elephant is the stronger. And both require a guide and a goad."

"Certainly, my father; were they not born to it?" replied Desika, who did not perceive the drift of his father's thoughts.

They parted with the traveller and reformer, and stepped into a brougham drawn by a pair of fine Walers. As they were whirled away through a haze of sunlit dust, Desika said—

"My sister has arrived at our house. You have not seen her yet."

"I left before she came and during my absence I gave permission for her to remain with the Collector's wife and his guest."

"She is longing to see you. It was well to leave her with Miss Loree. But now it must be at an end. I hope that we shall have nothing to regret," remarked Desika, a shade of anxiety crossing his face.

"I have no fears, even though a difficulty may arise in finding a suitable husband for her," replied his father, with confidence.

"What will be done about the restoration of her caste?" asked Desika, presently.

"Nothing, my son."

The young man was not quite satisfied with the reply. "It may affect her marriage."

"We will consider the matter when we seek a husband. For the present it is sufficient that she is my daughter, and

that she has obediently fulfilled my will. Now about the tobacco fields. They require your presence. You must put congress out of your thoughts for a time, and give your undivided attention to the manufacture of cigars. I am anxious to harvest the crops in a different manner, but the cultivators are opposed to any change. At present they cut the whole plant down and wither it with its stalks and leaves. I want to save the waste that occurs with the immature leaves. The leaves must be gathered as they come to perfection, and be withered and fermented without the stalk and shoots. This means close supervision and undivided attention."

Sobraon Rao continued to explain what he desired, and they talked business the rest of the way, the inherited instincts of the merchant rising and dominating the son as he listened to the plan of his shrewd father for adding to the crores of rupees already garnered.

The carriage stopped under the portico of the screened doorway. Sobraon, forgetting all else except the fact that he was a father, a fact that gave him kinship with West and East alike, descended quickly from the carriage. Without another word he entered the house and penetrated to the women's quarters.

A beautiful girl, tall and graceful, rushed forward into his arms. As the keen-eyed merchant gazed at his daughter he knew that no mistake had been made. The English lady had been true to her trust, and given him back his jewel refined and ennobled.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NATIVE LADY AT HOME

THE blossoms of the plumeria shed their sweet scent over the dinner-table. The white flowers, sulphur stained in the centre, were not approved of by the stately butler who ruled the household. To him they were "temple flowers," from the pagoda tree, and were unworthy of a place upon the master's table. But they were there by the express order of the mistress, who remembered the infirmity of her guest. The tiny magnolia-like cups were pleasant to the touch as well as the nostrils, and the sensitive fingers fluttered with keen appreciation over the vases like the antennæ of a human moth.

"I can picture them; how exquisitely cool and delicate the petals are!" exclaimed Dolores.

The servants removed the ice-plates and arranged the dessert. Their duties ended, they left the room.

"Are we alone?" she whispered to Miss Beauchamp, who sat by her side. "Yes? Then I want to ask Mr. Newent a question on a subject that I do not care to mention before the servants."

"What is it?" demanded her host, with ready attention.

"Can you tell me why so much difficulty is made over my visit to Rama Rajah's wife?"

He took out his cigarette case, asking if he might smoke.

"Certainly, and while you smoke you may explain many things that puzzle me. I have been here three weeks and I have seen Veerama every day. There has been no difficulty

over her visits. She comes, as you know, in her brougham; she walks in announced by the servant like any English lady. Rama Rajah does the same; he rarely misses a day. But though I have begged him frequently to bring his wife, he has never done so."

"Husband and wife do not pay visits together," remarked Ambrose Newent.

Dolores continued her tale. "To-day I drove to his house with Miss Beauchamp, and asked for his wife. A young man, who said his name was Jaganath, came forward. He spoke English and took my message in. The reply was that the lady could not see me. Then I asked if Rama Rajah was at home. Jaganath replied in the affirmative, but explained that he was 'telling his prayers and bathing,' and was unable to receive me. Was it so, or did the man put me off with frivolous excuses?"

"It was probably correct about Rama Rajah. I don't profess to understand the domestic ceremonial of a high-caste Hindu; but I have to submit to something of the same treatment myself, and make my appointments with my subordinate to suit the exigencies of his religious routine. Even the peons are granted certain hours in the day, that they may perform their daily ceremonies. Wouldn't it be better to give up the attempt to see Rama Rajah's family, as they do not appear to be desirous of receiving you?"

"Not at all!" she replied, with quick decision. "I must have an interview before I go to the Hills. If you can explain what the obstruction is, perhaps I can overcome it."

"You have set me a task which is not easy. Generally speaking all social difficulties between English and Indian ladies arise from the fact that the women of the East and the women of the West, stand on two different planes—planes so widely separated, that it is impossible at present to bridge them."

"Veerama and I have bridged them," exclaimed Dolores.

"I grant that there are exceptions. Veerama has indeed crossed the gulf; but at what cost? Nothing less than partial

ostracism from her father's caste, though not from his family. You will find, on inquiry, that she is not admitted into the kitchen, the most important, most honourable apartment of the house, and that she takes her meals by herself."

"Yes, I know that she eats alone ; but that is because she prefers to continue her European habits."

Newent smiled as he watched the blue smoke ascend and left the statement unchallenged. He merely said—

"We cannot quote Veerama as an example. She is the exception, and until she performs the expiatory ceremonies she can continue to cross the gulf that divides you."

"Then it is all a question of caste, the old-man-of-the-sea who sits upon the shoulders of the Hindus and governs them despotically ?"

"Caste is one of the difficulties on the Hindu side. For both there is the social side, and my sympathies are with the Hindus in this great problem as well as with the English."

"What is the problem ?"

"How to reconcile the social amenities. The English lady is brought up in a different atmosphere. There are certain recognized conventions and unwritten rules governing her speech and actions. The ladies of India also possess rules of speech and conduct, but the difference is so great between theirs and ours, that any intimacy with freedom of speech would inevitably lead to a series of shocks on both sides which must cause offence and possibly rupture. The Hindu lady brought up in the stagnancy of the family life, her world narrowed down to the routine of the household, and seasoned with gossip and scandal, would find an interest in discussing matters unmentioned by the refined Englishwoman. On the other hand, the Hindu lady would be filled with veritable horror at the thought of having a chat with one of her husband's acquaintances in a morning call, a liberty which is the prerogative of every Englishwoman."

"These are matters which may be regulated by education," suggested Dolores, who was inclined to believe that Newent was prejudiced against the native.

"Perhaps; but there are other social conditions which education is not likely to affect," he replied.

"The zenana system with its purdah rules?" she inquired.

"I had in my mind the more momentous question of marriage. The Hindus are practically polygamous, while we are markedly monogamous. They have found it expedient, as polygamists, to seclude their women in the zenanas. We, on the contrary, have placed no restriction on the liberty of the fair sex. Indeed, far from being secluded, our ladies are often more powerful socially than their husbands and brothers. This is the result of monogamy and the consequent elevation of your sex. How can universal freedom of intercourse exist between two races who hold such opposite views on one of the vital points of life?"

"Would it not be possible to teach them that polygamy is detrimental to the advancement of their women?"

"To do so it would be necessary to attack their religion. If there is one thing more vital than marriage with the Hindus it is their religion, and there again the difference of thought and teaching is enormous. As for dress, food, amusements, pursuits, the divergence is of trifling consequence compared with the two great questions—religion and marriage. Until the East and West can be at one on broad general lines in these matters, there can be no standing together on the same platform, no social unity, no cohesion, no real sympathy, though there may be great regard, respect, and even a certain amount of friendship in the case of chance individuals."

Dolores was silent. Rama Rajah, when in England, was not an advocate of polygamy, and he had given her to understand that he and she worshipped the same God although under different forms. Already she had been acquainted with the suggestion of his mother that he should take another wife, a suggestion that was naturally repulsive to her; and from the occasion of their very first meeting in India when he had refused to take tea with her, she had felt the barrier set up by his religion and by the expiatory caste ceremonies which he had been compelled to perform. Her heart rebelled against

acquiescing in these two facts, but she would not admit that they could be any real cause of estrangement. She clung to the belief that it only needed an effort on her part to retain the old intimate friendship.

"I am unwilling to allow either of these points of difference to interfere with the relations between Rama Rajah and myself," she declared after a pause.

"And your affection for him leads you to believe that it would be a friendly act to make the acquaintance of his wife. I assure you that it would be more friendly on your part not to press for an interview," said Newent, earnestly.

Dolores moved restlessly; her fingers hovered over a low vase of plumeria blossoms which she had drawn towards her from the centre of the table.

"Do not think me obstinate, Mr. Newent," she pleaded, with a voice grown suddenly unsteady. "I must—I will meet the wife of the man who has been as a brother to me through the awful darkness of my girlhood. Ah! You cannot understand what Rama Rajah was to me. You don't know how I missed him when he passed out of my life."

The passionate sadness in her appeal touched him. He laid down the end of his cigarette and his eyes rested upon her pathetic face with a great pity. He alone knew the secret of her heart, and he kept it as something sacred even from the knowledge of his wife. Before he could reply a servant entered with a note.

"This is for you, Dolores," said Mrs. Newent.

"Please read it aloud," she answered.

It was a few lines from Rama Rajah himself, regretting his inability to see her when she called, and asking if she would come the following day, naming an hour when he hoped he would be able to present his wife. The messenger had received orders to wait for a reply.

"This is very satisfactory," exclaimed Mrs. Newent. "It settles the difficulty without any further trouble."

"I am pleased that Rama Rajah has put his foot down at last," added her husband. "He wishes to do what is right,

but, poor fellow, he has a superhuman task in the governing of his family."

"I am delighted; I am longing to hold the hand of his wife in mine," said Dolores, the colour mounting with an emotion she strove in vain to subdue.

"You must persuade her to come and see us," observed Mrs. Newent. "It will be an opportunity which I shall be pleased to seize. I have invited her more than once, but there has always been some excuse offered. Let her name her own time and day."

"I am to include Rama Rajah in the invitation of course," asked Dolores.

"By all means. But he will not come with her in the same carriage. She will probably drive here under the care of one of the older ladies of the household, who may or may not come in, and he will follow. We shall not be able to have much conversation as I don't speak the language, and she knows nothing of English. But with Rama Rajah's help we can amuse and interest her. We may possibly persuade her to repeat the visit."

As she finished the utterance of these friendly sentiments Mrs. Newent rose from the table, knowing that her husband had at least an hour's work in the office before he could retire to rest.

"Shall I answer the note for you?" asked Miss Beauchamp.

"Please; and give him my love. Say I will come gladly."

She lifted the blossoms from the vase near at hand and carried them to the drawing-room, caressing the wax-white petals with fingers that had to serve as eyes. After coffee had been handed round she turned to Mrs. Newent.

"The night is warm; I should like to go into the garden."

She led her out into a flood of Indian moonlight. Its exquisite beauty was lost on Dolores, but she felt something of the peace of the night, as she rested on the garden-seat, whilst her hostess went back to the house.

The garden was silent except for the little spotted owls that clamoured in disputation over personal matters upon the

branches of the tamarind trees, and for the distant bark of a pariah dog in the town. The chattering sparrows that had pervaded the verandahs all day were hidden in the dark recesses of the thorn hedge. At sunset they spent a vociferous half-hour settling themselves to roost; but once asleep nothing short of a fire would have aroused them. The green paroquets had abandoned the mango tree with its luscious treasures, and had sought their dormitory under the eves of the temple gateway and ceased their screaming. The black robin's song was hushed and the "wandering voice" of the Indian cuckoo, that echoed in the palms at sunset, was silenced. The scent of sweet blossoms filled the air as the faint breath of the night-wind blowing from the big tank swept across their petals. The tropical vegetation of the borders, that had drooped under the fiery rays of the midday sun, took fresh courage and reared blossom and bud with renewed strength.

Dolores, usually so sensitive to all the varying moods of nature, felt the peace of the evening. But her attention did not dwell upon the quiet of the night. Her mind was occupied with the impending visit which roused within her breast a strange mixture of emotions. Now that it was arranged that she should meet the wife of Rama Rajah a curious disinclination took possession of her; she shrank from the encounter, and the consciousness of this flinching in the execution of what she considered a sacred duty, was perplexing. The peace of the night failed to calm her troubled soul as she vainly asked herself whether it was possible that she was not yet reconciled to the fact that Rama Rajah was a married man. Could it also be possible that she resented the existence of a wife and was merely influenced in her desire for an interview by feminine curiosity? If she went in such a spirit, it was not likely that she would be able to conciliate; nor would she succeed in drawing her into the friendly relationship that ought to exist between them.

When Miss Beauchamp, having written and despatched the note, joined her half an hour later, Dolores expressed a

wish to retire to her room. She spent a disturbed night, but awoke the next morning with her heart under better control. Her natural sweetness triumphed over that faint shadow of jealousy which had crept into the garden of her soul, and at the appointed hour she was ready to set out upon her mission with nothing but love and good-will towards the unknown wife of her old friend.

Punctually to the moment the carriage drew up before the door of Rama Rajah's house. Dolores' heart beat with strange anticipation as she stepped down from the brougham. By her own wish she paid the visit alone. Jaganath was the first to reach the carriage, and he instantly clasped the hand extended for assistance.

"Who are you?" she asked, conscious of a strange touch.

"I am Jaganath, my cousin's attendant," he replied.

"I recognize your voice. You met us yesterday."

Rama Rajah came hastily forward with a warm greeting on his lips. Pushing his kinsman aside he took possession of his guest.

"Be careful, Ranee, six more steps to mount," he cried, with something of his old joyousness.

He linked his arm in hers and guided her feet with the solicitation and care that were so sweet to the blind girl. They crossed the wide verandah and entered the formal reception-room, with its circular table in the centre and the chairs and sofa ranged round it. Had Miss Beauchamp been there she would have noted the absence of ornamental furniture, pictures and vases; but the appearance of the room had no effect on Dolores. To her it was the same as any other room, and the fact that it held Rama Rajah was sufficient. Happiness shone upon her face. The blue eyes turned towards the beloved object as though they tried vainly to pierce through the terrible darkness that enveloped her. The shell-like ears bent towards the voice that vibrated through her whole being.

The various entrances to the room were screened with half-doors which allowed light and air to pass above and

below. Behind one of these Lukshmi stood listening to that voice. She had seen her husband lead up his visitor. Her quick eye had noted the care with which he had guided her to a seat and had drawn his chair near to hers oblivious of all else but the English girl.

A new passion sprang suddenly to birth and pulsed wildly through the ill-regulated heart of the spoilt beauty as the tone of Rama Rajah's voice fell on her ear. A fiery suspicion like an evil spirit darted through her, and the oval nails were driven into the soft palms as she clenched her hands. She watched whilst the unconscious couple sat for some minutes absorbed in conversation.

Behind her, prying and peeping, stood her mother-in-law and other female members of the family. Presently Dolores asked for Lukshmi, and Rama Rajah bade Jaganath go with a message to say that the English lady could not stay long and desired to see the young mistress. At the first sound of his call Lukshmi retreated swiftly towards the women's quarters, where Jaganath found her. She listened impatiently, stamped her foot, and bade him begone as an unwelcome messenger.

“The young master waits,” he said with persistence.

There was no love lost between the two. In Jaganath's opinion—and it was shared by others—his cousin was making a grave mistake in the treatment of his wife. He was too lenient, and his indulgence would breed trouble in time; such liberty of speech and action was contrary to all tradition. But he did not dare to criticize openly. His bread depended upon the good will of his relatives, and his happiness would be destroyed if he were parted from his cousin to whom he was much attached.

“Go, go, child!” urged her mother-in-law, who had followed. “If you do not go now the lady will come again and again and we shall have no peace.”

Lukshmi had a certain amount of curiosity and was not really averse to meeting her visitor; but she was in a perverse humour, which the sudden spark of jealousy had aroused. The elder woman, who, for all her indulgence, had a will of her own,

and knew how to exercise it when she chose, seized the reluctant girl by the arm, dragged her to the door, and thrust her through it without further ceremony.

It was not a dignified entrance, and Rama Rajah sprang to his feet startled. He grasped the situation, and before Lukshmi could escape he took her by the hand and led her forward. It was well that Dolores could not see how unwillingly she came, like a spoilt, ungracious child, nor the unbecoming scowl that clouded her face as Rama Rajah placed the hand of his wife in that of his friend. The cool, white fingers closed with a firm retaining clasp upon the small brown ones that trembled and endeavoured vainly to escape. Dolores passed the other hand over the hair and features with the fluttering touch so familiar to Rama Rajah. Lukshmi shrank from it like a frightened bird.

"Tell her that it is my way of looking at her. My eyes are in my fingers. She must not be frightened. Assure her that I love every one belonging to my friend as I love him," said Dolores, noting the struggle of the girl to free herself.

In his own way he endeavoured to set his wife at ease, but without success.

"Why does she want to hold me—she, the friend of Shanars? She clings to me like a bat. Why have the gods blinded her and left her unmarried? She must have done some great evil in a former birth to be so cursed," cried Lukshmi, with increasing aversion.

"What does she say?" asked Dolores. "She has a pleasant voice, young and fresh, but not so musical as yours, Rama Rajah."

"She is shy and nervous. You are the first European lady to speak to her," he replied in some embarrassment between the two.

Lukshmi glanced from one to the other with rising anger, and burst into rapid speech.

"Now I know why you are cursed and cannot give me a son. It is this woman. She has laid a spell on you. Ah! she shall not touch me any longer;" and she snatched away her

hand roughly, with the intention of escaping from the room. But her mother-in-law anticipated her action and was at her elbow.

"Behave yourself, girl!" she cried. "This lady is a friend of the Collector. Would you spoil your husband's prospects by insulting her?"

At the sound of the fresh voice Dolores turned to Rama Rajah.

"Do I hear your mother speaking?"

"Yes, she is here."

Dolores instantly extended her hand and clasped that of the older lady, who did not shrink like the younger. She knew enough of English ways to understand that it was the usual greeting between equals, and need not be regarded as a familiarity or an insult. They seated themselves on the chairs, and, with the help of Rama Rajah, something like a conversation passed between them. Lukshmi sat silent and sulky, not daring to misbehave in any way under the watchful eye of her mother-in-law. An unusually long speech uttered with some animation by the latter but not translated by her son roused the curiosity of Dolores.

"What does she say? Tell me, Rajah, I wish to hear everything."

He hesitated and did not answer. Again his mother spoke, apparently urging him to do something whilst he expressed his disapproval. Dolores laid her hand upon his arm, an action that did not escape the eye of the wife.

"Tell me; I must know what she asks."

"It is a request, and this is not the moment to prefer it."

"Nevertheless I wish to hear what it is."

"She has a great longing to return to Tinnevelly. At the same time she does not wish to go there without me. Government appointed me to the Madura district, and she is always hoping that I may be sent to Tinnevelly."

"Tinnevelly! Tinnevelly!" cried the old lady, summoning up the few words of English that she knew. "Newent Dorai, Tinnevelly;" then, as the foreign tongue failed her, she repeated

her request in her own language. When she had finished Dolores said with something of the old authority which she exercised over the boy in past years—

“Now, Rama Rajah, tell me at once what she wants.”

“She would have you ask Mr. Newent to obtain my transfer to Tinnevelly, where our property and ancestral home is. But you remember what he said years ago at your father's house. I cannot expect him to do such a thing.”

“Perhaps there are others who might help. Please tell her that I will do all in my power to get the appointment you desire, and that I hope before long that she will go back to Tinnevelly.”

His mother was quick to gather the import of the words. A sudden joy filled the heart of the homesick lady. She took the hand of Dolores and pressed it to her lips in a gush of warm gratitude that was genuine.

“Child, the lady will help us ! Tell her we shall bless her ; give her the thanks that the English love.”

But Lukshmi drew back with scorn and contempt.

“Ay, she will give all that he, my husband, asks. Can you not see that she loves him, that she would give her life-blood for him ? Note how she hangs upon his voice, how she lays her hand with the boldness of a dasi upon his arm. But I tell you, mother-in-law, that she is cursed of the gods in her blindness. Can any maimed thing bestow blessings when it is weighed down with a curse ? Ask ! Oh yes, ask all that you like and she will give it without requiring thanks. But the curse will go with the favour even as the bitter goes with the sweet when the worm has buried itself in the mango and spoiled its flavour.”

Fortunately for Dolores she did not comprehend what the passionate girl was saying. She mistook her voluble speech for the out-pouring of thanks. Turning to Rama Rajah she observed—

“I am so glad to be of help to you and your family.”

“My mother is very grateful ; her desire to return to the old home grows stronger each month that passes.”

"Then I will do my best. Before I say good-bye I must give you Mrs. Newent's message. She asks if your wife will pay her a visit."

He glanced doubtfully at Lukshmi as he explained the matter to his mother, who replied promptly—

"Tell the lady that your wife will gladly come. Grant her any request that she may make. Let nothing be done that may give offence since it is through her that we may look for the fulfilment of our great desire."

There was some discussion, necessarily slow in its progress from the need of interpretation. At its conclusion it was decided that the visit should be paid a few days later in the evening between eight and nine o'clock; and though they would not arrive together Rama Rajah would be present, as, without the assistance of an interpreter, there would be no conversation.

With the same tender care he conducted Dolores to the carriage, leading her by the hand and guiding her footsteps. At the carriage door she stopped and asked if he could call at sunset that afternoon in about an hour's time. He accepted her invitation with pleasure written on his features, a pleasure which she could not see.

But Lukshmi, watching her husband, noted the expression with jealous eyes, and fury once more reigned within her heart. The lingering by the carriage, the touch of hands at parting, the peculiar inflection of his voice, a tone he had never used towards his wayward wife even in his softest moments pierced her soul. As she stood within the hall, her hand resting upon the back of the chair from which she had risen at Dolores' departure, she spat towards the unconscious couple. Her mother-in-law, who had remained by her side, took her by the arm with small ceremony and drew her through the screen doors in the direction of the women's quarters. Lukshmi resisted and gave expression to a word of abuse. Instantly the hand of the other was raised and brought down sharply upon the young cheek. The stinging blow fired the glowing embers into flame and Lukshmi turned upon her like a tiger. She

seized her mother-in-law by the hair, to the old lady's great astonishment, and tried to bite her.

Hearing the sound of a scuffle, two or three women hurried to the spot and pushed the struggling pair away from the vicinity of the reception-room. Before Rama Rajah could return to the house his mother and wife had passed into the seclusion of their private apartments.

CHAPTER IX

HIS CASTE

THE Assistant Collector went to his room and seated himself at his office table with the intention of resuming his work. But his mind wandered. Once or twice a distant scream of anger fell upon his ears together with the sound of voices raised in dispute. He was accustomed to such echoes. The noisy squabbles in the women's quarters that happen in ordinary Hindu families were not uncommon; but provided that they did not occur in his presence he took no more notice of them than of the sparrows in the garden fence. An hour's cyclonic storm of hot dispute and vituperation meant nothing serious, and would be closely followed by sunshine and laughter.

To-day, however, there was a grave quarrel between mother and daughter-in-law which ended in the administration of bodily punishment to the passionate girl-wife. It was not without its immediate benefit. It served to dissipate all thought of jealousy for the time. But as her fury against her mother-in-law cooled, the thought of the English lady returned and Lukshmi was convinced that her sufferings were the direct result of the visit. If the blind lady had not come her mother-in-law would not have been angered. It was the working of the curse.

Then, as she recalled the promise made that the visit should be returned, fury again burst forth, and she shrieked like an unruly child, rolling on the floor amongst her cushions, tearing her beautiful hair, dashing her jewels to right and left and generally abandoning herself to the ungoverned rage of a wild animal.

The Hindu husband does not worry himself over domestic tempests. He knows that time will restore peace, and if his mother is habitually moderate and well-disposed towards her daughter-in-law, which is more often than not the case, he is of the opinion that a little wholesome correction will do the girl no harm. Where there are signs of bullying and ill-treatment the husband is generally humane enough to afford the young wife some protection.

Rama Rajah had no need to trouble himself; his mother erred on the side of kindness and indulgence. She was warm-hearted and affectionate by nature, generous towards her dependents, and rarely abused her authority. Intrigue and gossip were the breath of life to her. But though ordinarily of a peaceful disposition she was capable of being roused; and when this happened, those who fell under her displeasure were apt to feel it.

This was not the first occasion on which she had boxed the ears of her wilful daughter-in-law; but at the first sign of sorrow and submission the elder lady had been appeased, and had endeavoured to make amends by an extra piece of indulgence towards the tearful beauty. Never before had Lukshmi dared to retaliate. To tell the truth the temptation to do so had never before assailed her. But the child had grown into the woman, and the temptation to turn and rend swept down upon the tempestuous young wife like a whirlwind. Without recognizing the gravity of her action, her fingers tore at the grey strands of hair, and her sharp teeth pierced the brown arm through the silk cloth.

As Rama Rajah sat in front of his littered office table, the distant wails of grief and screams of rage were unnoticed. His wife was forgotten. Before his mental eyes rose a vision that had been growing in strength as each day passed. In his dream soft eyes full of sympathy and intelligence gazed into his; a cultivated voice that neither screamed nor scolded responded with gentle dignity when he spoke. In Veerama he was beginning to recognize the perfect woman. Dolores had stamped upon her many of her own traits of character, traits

which he had learned to love in his boyhood. She was a second Dolores, a second Ranee, but of his own nationality. Her beauty was unmarred by blindness ; her health was perfect and her limbs sound. Physically she appealed equally to his manhood as her cultivation and refinement appealed to his intellect.

The vision had come to him with unusual strength on the departure of Dolores. It was inevitable that he should feel dissatisfaction at the childish behaviour of his wife and that the contrast should be suggested between her conduct and the probable behaviour of such a woman as Veerama. What a difference there would have been in the reception and in the conversation ! Lukshmi had openly expressed her disgust ; his mother had seized the opportunity to make an inopportune request. He could picture Dolores seated by the side of such a woman as Veerama, their hands linked in friendship, their souls uniting in sisterly love. If he married again his second wife must be just such a woman as Veerama.

But did such a woman exist within the folds of his caste ? His brow contracted in deep contemplation ; and if such a woman were found would it be possible for her to yield him the companionship, the sympathy, the love that his soul craved for ? Living in the midst of the family circle under the rule of the mother-in-law, and in the constant view of the first wife, there would be no privacy, no opportunity for that companionship such as he had enjoyed even with Dolores. Any attempt to break away from the time-honoured customs of the home life would give rise to opposition on the part of his mother, and to furious jealousy on the part of his wife.

It was a dream that could never be realized, he told himself ; yet for all that it gained strength and insidiously filled his brain night and day. With Veerama as his wife—he checked the mad current of his thoughts.

Veerama, his wife ! a Shanar ! What would his mother say ? What would the elders of his caste say ? A Shanar ! and one moreover who was degraded by her disregard of caste rules ! Such a thing was impossible !

The hot blood pulsed through his veins ; his heart throbbed at the very thought of it. Pushing his chair aside he called for Jaganath and ordered his carriage. He had promised to call on Dolores ; he would go at once although it wanted half an hour to sunset. To be with her, to listen to her, to feel her soothing touch would quiet the beating of his hot blood, and bring peace to his tormented soul.

Opening into the drawing-room of the Collector's house was a small morning-room. Mrs. Newent having her own boudoir upstairs, put this room at the disposal of her guest, and it was here that Rama Rajah usually sought Dolores. Passing along the verandah, he entered by a door that looked out over the garden, the peon in attendance having intimated that Miss Avondean was there.

The flower-beds were bathed in the warm rays of the descending sun. Black, scarlet, and bronze butterflies sat with extended wings upon the blossoms unmindful of the presence of the gardeners. The wash of the water falling from the pots upon the thirsty soil was a pleasant sound in the ears of Miss Beauchamp, as she rested upon a bench in the deep shade cast by the mango trees at the end of the garden.

With scarce a glance at the brightness outside, the Assistant Collector moved quickly towards the room. As he entered, a low moan of grief struck sharply on his ear. Unmoved he had heard the furious screams of rage in his own house without any desire to learn their cause. But this suffocated sob arrested his steps and sent a sharp pang through his whole being. The sight that met his eyes increased his perturbation of mind.

On a low chair sat Dolores, whilst before her knelt the bowed form of Veerama. The girl's face was hidden in the delicate laces of the white frock of her companion, whose protecting arm was thrown round the shaking form.

"Darling girl! don't cry! Surely we can persuade your mother to listen to reason," said the voice of Dolores, in soothing accents.

Rama Rajah hesitated, uncertain if he ought to proceed. But a sudden passionate desire to know what was causing the

grief that he witnessed, added to a knightly instinct to deal with the object and remove it, made him advance. The quick ear of the blind girl caught the sound of his footstep, and lifting her head, she cried—

“Rama Rajah, you are welcome! Perhaps you can give us advice and comfort.”

“What is the trouble?” he asked, seating himself near her.

Veerama rose with a startled glance and left the room. Dolores, hearing her move, called after her.

“Come back presently, Veerama.”

“Tell me, Ranee, what has happened to make Veerama so unhappy?”

She did not reply immediately. There was a new note in his voice which stirred her strangely, and a sudden suspicion intruded itself, diverting her thoughts. She put it aside resolutely, and turned to him to answer his question.

“Veerama’s mother informed her this morning that they were on the point of arranging a marriage for her. A Shanar has offered himself as her husband. He has a large palmyra estate, and is reckoned to be wealthy. But he is of middle age and old enough to be her father. Her mother considers him suitable as a son-in-law in every respect, and she is anxious to betroth her daughter. But, Rama Rajah,” she cried, with increasing agitation, “just think of the iniquity of the arrangement! The man is already married and has a family; and his wife is not only alive, but is living with him. He has had very little education; he knows nothing of English refinements, and he is absolutely unintellectual.”

She stopped for a moment; but, as he made no comment, she continued—

“The child will be miserable with such a man, common in all his ways, uncouth and uncivilized. And his womenkind are every whit as ignorant; they have the narrowest of views, and they observe caste rules that will break Veerama’s heart and spirit. What is to be done?”

“If her parents know that she has an aversion to the union

perhaps they will regard her wishes and not press the point," he suggested.

"It is incomprehensible to me that they should think of marrying her in that way after the education they have given her."

"It is the custom among the Hindus of all castes for the parents to make marriages for their children," he replied, his voice vibrating with an emotion he strove to subdue. "I myself was married in that way."

"Oh, it is disgraceful, abominable ! this disposing of sons and daughters as though they were inanimate chattels, instead of allowing them to choose for themselves. This man, who has asked for Veerama, demands that she shall have the necessary ceremonies performed for the restoration of her caste, and afterwards she is to be separated from me. If we meet at all it is to be in the presence of his mother or his wife. At present, you observe, he holds her in contempt—he ! that unrefined, uncultured farmer looks upon my beautiful Veerama as infinitely inferior to himself ! It is monstrous !"

"What does her father say?" asked Rama Rajah, after a pause.

"He is not at home just now, and she has not had an opportunity of speaking to him on the subject. Her mother announced it suddenly this morning, in anticipation of her father's return, and the child is terrified. I have tried to comfort her ; but she is in despair. She tells me that this man is the only suitor who has come forward. She is already beyond the usual age for marriage, and her mother declares that in her single condition she is a disgrace to the family ; that her caste people are beginning to point the finger of scorn at her, and that she ought to be very thankful for an offer from such a satisfactory man. Satisfactory ! Oh, Rama Rajah ! these are the cruelties of caste !"

"They are the rules and laws of a thousand years. But her father is an advanced thinker, and I do not believe that he will force her into marriage with any one against her will."

"I have said so half a dozen times to poor Veerama. But

she tells me that though he may take her part now, and give her a respite, marriage in the end is inevitable. If this man is refused, another, older and even more unsatisfactory, may come forward. What is to be done then ? "

" Have no young men approached Sobraon Rao ? "

" Not one. Apparently the loss of caste is having an effect on the friends and acquaintances of the family, and her constant visits to me are regarded with suspicion."

" What does her brother Desika say to it ? "

" I have not seen him lately ; but she tells me that he is full of his congress theories. ' India for the Indians ' is his cry. His sister must honour the traditions of her country and conform to its rules. He is constantly urging the necessity for her marriage without further delay, and he is pressing his parents to arrange his own wedding with a girl of twelve who is absolutely without education of any kind."

At this moment Veerama returned to the room, having composed herself and obliterated all trace of tears. She advanced gravely towards Rama Rajah, and placed her hand in his for the customary handshake that passed between them when they met in the presence of Dolores. A thrill ran through him as he felt the slender fingers tremble in his.

" I have just been explaining your dilemma to Rama Rajah," said Dolores.

Veerama did not trust herself to make any reply. He asked for the name of the suitor, and his brow contracted as she mentioned it.

" That man ! " he exclaimed with a ring of indignation in his tone. " Your father will never consent. Do not worry yourself ; he could not give you to such a coarse brute."

" It is my mother who urges it."

" But Desika, what of him ? "

" He would see me married at almost any cost. His Congress companions taunt him with our disregard of caste rules."

" There are other men," he began impetuously, and then stopped, as he became conscious of his inability to name a

suitable Hindu in Madura, into whose keeping this refined, cultured woman might pass with safety. The entrance into any one family circle would mean for her nothing but misery and a broken heart. The mere thought of it sent the blood racing through his veins, and lest she should read too much in his face he rose from his seat and wandered restlessly about the room.

"Rama Rajah, you are not going away just yet!" cried Dolores, apprehensively, as she heard his footsteps.

"No, Ranee; I am thinking over all that you have told me."

"Can you offer any solution of the difficulty?"

"I am afraid not." He returned to her side and sank into a chair. "But I can give a piece of advice which is important."

"Concerning this man?"

"As for him he should be rejected without a moment's hesitation, and I fully believe that that will be his fate at the hands of Sobraon Rao. He is utterly unworthy of consideration. His mother is a tyrant, if report speaks truly, and his wife a termagant. Moreover the house is never free from temple women."

He stopped abruptly as he remembered that Seeta, the dancing girl, was living under his own roof.

"When the right man presents himself," he continued, "Miss Veerama must demand a house and establishment of her own through her father. It is a departure from the old tradition, but there is no breach of caste rules in such an arrangement; and it is undoubtedly the first step towards domestic happiness and matrimonial independence."

"You hear, Veerama; it is what I have already been urging upon you, if you must marry." She turned to Rama Rajah. "Is marriage absolutely necessary?" she demanded, in a voice that rang with trouble.

"I am afraid so," he answered unwillingly. It hurt him to witness her distress. "Even Sobraon, with his advanced social views and his laxity in the observance of caste rules,

would assert with his son that marriage, sooner or later, must be the fate of his daughter. When it comes, if she obtains that one concession, and secures through it her emancipation from the governance of the family circle, she may have a chance of happiness."

"You have not secured it for yourself," pronounced Dolores.

"In my case it would not benefit any one. My wife, as you know, has not had the advantage of an English education, and it is not necessary. But if I am compelled to take a second wife——"

He was silent as he was suddenly confronted with a family problem which could not easily be solved.

"You would marry again with your first wife living?" asked Dolores, incredulously.

"It has been proposed that I should do so."

"I know; but would you consent? Why, it would be bigamy!"

"Bigamy and polygamy are not dishonourable among the Hindus," he said gently. "Ranee, I am a Hindu, an orthodox Hindu, a fact you must bear in mind when you judge me."

At this moment Miss Beauchamp entered the room, bearing sprays of jasmin in her hands.

"I have brought you some flowers from the gardener, Loree, and he asks if he may present his wife and baby to you."

"Oh yes! I promised to speak to them. Are they in the verandah?" inquired Dolores, rising from her chair.

"The man tells me that it is not correct for him and his wife to enter whilst his excellency, the Assistant Collector, is here," replied Miss Beauchamp, smiling.

"He is quite right," responded Rama Rajah quickly. "It would be a great impertinence. Kindly tell them to wait, Miss Beauchamp."

"No, Rama Rajah," objected Dolores. "Why should the poor things be kept waiting? Take me to them, Miss Beauchamp; I have something for the baby."

Dolores placed her hand in her companion's arm and went into the verandah, leaving Veerama and Rama Rajah standing where they had risen from their seats.

"I am sorry for your trouble," said Rama Rajah, presently. "Would it not be possible for you to return to England if all thought of marriage is so distasteful to you?"

As he spoke his eyes rested on hers which fell before his gaze.

"My father would never consent to losing me a second time. No, I must stay now, and hope that the gods will be gracious."

"Veerama, does your father know that you and I meet here?"

"No, I have never mentioned your name in my home."

"Would he object to our meeting?"

"How could he? Are you not an honourable gentleman and of higher caste, a friend of my friend? Your kindness and condescension ought to be considered an honour."

An exclamation of impatience escaped his lips.

"Condescension and kindness!" he repeated scornfully. "An Englishman would say that the condescension and kindness were with you."

"But you are not an Englishman. As you admitted a few minutes ago, you are an orthodox Hindu."

"I forgot the fact when I am with you," he cried impetuously, and then checked himself.

There was silence whilst Rama Rajah's eyes dwelt upon the regular features and oval face. As he gazed an odd feeling of jealousy gnawed at his heart. The man who demanded this fair flower of Indian womanhood came before his mental vision, ugly and repulsive. Was it only that Veerama should serve his brutal appetite, that Dolores had devoted so many years to the formation of her character? He shuddered at the thought of such a sacrifice. After some moments he spoke again.

"Has your father no friends of his own caste in Madras who have received their education in England?"

She knew what was in his mind as he put the question. Could not her father make a better choice than this toddy farmer? And she answered directly and to the point.

"There are none of our caste who would marry me. The Shanars, as you probably know, are content with the education offered by the country, and my brother is the only Shanar of his generation who has ventured across the water."

He took a step nearer to her. "Veerama!" There was a depth of passion in his voice that shook her self-possession. "Veerama! Why, oh! why did the gods cause you to be born a Shanar? Why were you not a Vellalan?"

She did not answer immediately; but when she spoke her tones were low and steady.

"Since the gods so willed it I must be content."

Her calmness and resignation only stirred him the more. "Think what it would have been to me!—to you!" he cried passionately. "If we could have spent our lives together! Is it not possible?"

"For a Vellalan to wed a Shanar! It would never be permitted, except at the sacrifice of all the Vellalan's caste privileges, or the complete loss of the Shanar to her own family. It would drag you down into everlasting disgrace, or separate me for ever from my father. No! No!" she replied, her breath coming in short gasps as the strain grew beyond her strength. "Do not dream of such madness; it means ruin to you."

She listed her eyes to his and met his burning gaze. His arms were extended with a sudden mute appeal. There was a second's pause, when she seemed to totter on the verge of a precipice.

The sound of footsteps in the verandah dispelled the madness of the moment with the rapidity of a flash of lightning. By a supreme effort she controlled the impulse of her soul, and drew back out of his eager reach. He uttered her name in a despairing protest, and dropped his arms.

"Veerama!"

Dolores, feeling her way in at the open door from the

verandah, caught the sound of that beloved voice and heard the utterance of the name. Again something pierced her heart like a sharp stiletto, and the suspicion which she had chased from her mind reasserted itself. Rama Rajah, as soon as he saw her in the doorway, hurried to her side, guiding her to her seat with his customary care and attention. Neither spoke; but as she laid her hand in his, her delicate sense of perception told her even more than the tone of his voice. The dark suspicion which she had driven away returned and was confirmed. She knew that she had at last met the rival with whom she must at least share in his affections, and that rival was not his wife.

CHAPTER X

A GOLD BANGLE

“VEERAMA,” said Dolores, with a sudden decision as she turned towards her, “it is time for you to be going home. I am tired, dear, and must rest before dinner. Come to me to-morrow morning and stay to lunch. Also give Desika a message from me ; tell him that I should much like to have a talk with him. Miss Beauchamp, will you kindly ask the peon to call Veerama’s carriage ?”

“Allow me,” exclaimed Rama Rajah, hastening into the verandah.

Veerama kissed Dolores, and as she did so a wave of tenderness swept over the heart of the blind girl. She returned the kiss warmly.

“Keep a good heart and make a strong appeal to your father as soon as he returns. I feel sure that you may look confidently to him for help and sympathy.”

Miss Beauchamp accompanied Veerama to the carriage, but it was Rama Rajah who helped her in. He offered his hand and as she laid hers within his she felt the tightening of his fingers in a lingering grip. No word passed between them ; the few that were spoken were exchanged with Miss Beauchamp, but a wild delirious joy filled her soul. She lifted her eyes to his in one swift farewell glance. He read the light in them, and his heart leaped and throbbed with a passion no woman had ever before awakened. He went slowly towards the morning-room, where Dolores sat, pensive and still, wrestling with the new and disquieting feeling suddenly aroused.

"I must not stay, Ranee, if you have a headache," he said, standing before her.

"It is nothing much, and your presence will do it good. Your voice always soothes me——" she stopped short as she recalled the new and unfamiliar ring in it, as he had uttered Veerama's name.

"As the touch of your hand soothes me," he added.

"I was so glad to meet your wife to-day," observed Dolores, when he had resumed his seat by her side.

"It was a novelty for both my wife and my mother."

"Rama Rajah!" she cried, with increasing earnestness. "You cannot want another wife with her by your side. It seems so shocking, so contrary to all civilized teaching to deliberately contemplate polygamy. Don't you think so yourself?"

"I have felt it to a certain extent. Yet there are times when I am glad that I have the liberty to make another choice if I desire it."

With a swift reversion to the old confidential relations which once existed between them, he threw off some of his reserve, and spoke of certain difficulties in his present life; of his solitariness and isolation in the midst of his family and of his intense craving at times for sympathy and congenial fellowship.

Dolores listened with the attention and tenderness he remembered of old. Presently she extended her hand and closed her fingers round his, as she used to do when she received the confidences of the sensitive Hindu boy and administered advice and comfort.

"What I miss is the home-life that you taught me to love and which the ordinary Englishman looks to his wife to create for him. My wife can never create such a home."

As he ceased she shook her head with her own especial sign of dissent, which was not quite like that of the ordinary person.

"You must not hope that I shall encourage you to take a second wife. You are a victim of the iniquitous custom of

child-marriage. But as the marriage is an accomplished fact you must make the best of it." He did not reply; and she added, "I cannot believe that matters will be mended by your marrying another wife."

There was silence. The same unuttered thought filled the mind of both. Dolores, startled and pained by the rebellious turbulence within her breast, tried in vain to assure herself that she contemplated the question impartially, and that she preached monogamy on principle and for that sole reason. But a small voice within her proclaimed insistently that there was another factor besides principle. The insidious flame of jealousy, kindled into life when Ambrose Newent revealed the fact of Rama Rajah's marriage, had something to do with her antagonism. She strove to subdue it, to stamp it out, and she was not altogether unsuccessful. The silence was broken by Rama Rajah. In a low voice that trembled with emotion, he said—

"Think, Ranee, what my life might have been with a woman like Veerama."

She caught her breath, and her disengaged hand was lifted and pressed against her lips to steady them for speech.

"Such a thing is impossible—now," she replied, in a low voice. "If she had been of your caste—if there had been no child-marriage, and if you had been free to choose, it might have been."

"Would you have given your consent, Ranee, and have continued your friendship with us both?"

There was a pause, and during that brief interval the blind girl gathered all the forces of her generous nature, conquering, with a giant's strength, the evil spirit of jealousy.

"Yes, Rama Rajah, yes," she murmured faintly. Then, with growing decision, she continued, "It would have rejoiced me beyond all things to have known that you and Veerama were united. But, under the circumstances, it can never be, and it will only bring misery upon you to allow your mind to dwell upon the impossible."

"Thought is like the star that shoots; it flies whither it

wills and is not to be controlled. It was to-day, when I saw my wife with you, that the thought darted through my mind how different would have been your reception if——”

She interrupted him quickly, purposely construing his words into an apology which he was not making.

“Do not trouble yourself about such a trifle. Your wife seemed shy and was somewhat eclipsed by your mother. When your wife pays us her promised visit here I hope to draw her to me and overcome the shyness.”

He sighed as he contemplated the task she had set herself of winning the regard, to say nothing of the affection, of the prejudiced, spoilt, ignorant, Hindu girl. Taking leave of Dolores he went into the verandah, where he encountered Ambrose Newent.

“Ah, Rama Rajah, you are just the person I want to see,” cried the latter, genially, as he advanced towards him. “Come into the garden ; I won’t detain you long. I have something to tell you.”

Together they walked to the deserted tennis-court, lying in the silvery light of the rising moon. A red glow still hung in the west, turning the heavy foliage of the mango and tamarind trees into a rich madder brown as they stood out sharply against the sky. The gardeners had ended their labours with the watering-pots, and had retired to their huts. The flying foxes winged their heavy silent flight overhead, and the strength of the sparrows’ argument over the order of their roosting in the thorn hedge, was weakened by somnolence into intermittance. Pacing up and down the smooth earthen surface of the court the Collector and his Assistant could talk without fear of being overheard by listening peon and inquisitive servant.

“Have you made that appointment at Sivapet?” asked Newent.

“I wrote to the brother of the late Munsif only yesterday, and told him that I had nominated him for the post. In doing so I acted in accordance with your advice, as it seemed to me the best choice I could make.”

Rama Rajah glanced at his chief with inquiry.

"Undoubtedly I confirmed your choice. Did the man offer any bribe?"

"Certainly not. Had he done so I should have refused it," replied Rama Rajah, promptly, and with a faint touch of indignation in his tone.

Newent's keen eyes dwelt upon the face of his Assistant in the bright light of the moon.

"And the relation of the Tahsildar, did he offer no bribe?"

"None whatever; I did not give him an opportunity of offering one, as I refused all interviews. I thought it best not to see any of the candidates."

"You were quite right. But, in spite of all your care, I have reason to believe that bribes were offered, and, what is more, they were accepted."

"Not with my knowledge," rejoined Rama Rajah, quickly.

"That I can quite understand; I feel sure that you would not lend yourself to anything of the kind," Newent assured him heartily, and not without a feeling of compassion.

"What proof have you that there has been bribery?" asked the Assistant.

"No proof at present, but only the accusation. I have received a letter from the Tahsildar stating that sums of money from no less than five candidates were accepted. He claims that his relative was the highest bidder. In addition to the money, he asserts that a gold bangle set with an emerald was also given, and in consideration of this he claims that he ought to have been appointed."

Rama Rajah was silent. A flood of trivial memories, trivial no longer, overwhelmed him. He called to mind the bracelet he had seen upon the arm of his wife, and the smouldering suspicion that had prompted him to ask how she came by it. Her reply had set at rest any shadow of doubt that he might have experienced at the time.

The suspicion returned with a force that carried conviction with it, giving birth to a deep-seated wrath. He had expressed

himself plainly on the subject of bribery, and, to avoid any chance of misunderstanding, he had prohibited it in straightforward language comprehensive to his mother and wife. Fruit, flowers, vegetables, and sweets were allowable; but jewellery, money, and valuable presents must absolutely be refused. Those were his directions, and they had been received with a silence which he took for acquiescence. It galled him in the spirit to find that his orders had been so flagrantly disobeyed, and that he was brought under the just reproof of his superior. He made no attempt to deny or to excuse the offence. He merely repeated his assurance that it had not been done with his knowledge.

Newent was pleased with his attitude, more pleased than he cared to show. He had dreaded a sweeping denial and an indignant refutation. He was well aware of the difficulties with which Rama Rajah was confronted in his house, and of his awkward position; and he had suggested—without much hope of the suggestion being adopted—that the Assistant Collector should separate himself from his parents and the numerous relatives who were sheltered under his father's roof, and set up a small establishment for himself. To this proposition the Assistant Collector had replied that his wife was too young and inexperienced to rule without the assistance of some older woman; and the proper and only person who could be asked to give that assistance was his own mother. Newent knew enough of native life to realize the justice of the answer, and felt that it was useless to press Rama Rajah further.

"You must inquire into the matter and find out if the tale is true," pronounced Newent, authoritatively, but without offence.

"I will certainly do so, and see that the bangle is restored to the owner."

"At the same time you must make your family understand the danger of compromising you in this way," continued Newent, with a desire to say what he thought was his duty to say, and then to drop the matter. "Bribery is a serious offence against the Government. Your salary is liberal, and it is given

with the express purpose of placing you out of temptation. A breach of the rules is liable to bring trouble. It may even jeopardize your appointment."

The words burned into the brain of the Assistant Collector. They did not actually convey reproof, but the warning partook of the nature of reproof, and sank deep into the sensitive highly strung mind of the listener. He took leave of his chief, reiterating his promise of making inquiry, and of issuing strict injunctions against the repetition of the offence on the part of his relatives. He uttered his farewell with quiet politeness, giving no sign of the wrath that had been roused against those who had brought disgrace upon him. Mingled with it was a sense of injustice. Newent was quite right in all that he had said, but the implied reproof was unmerited personally, and he writhed in spirit under it.

Yet he recognized the reasonableness of its administration. It was impossible for the Collector to speak directly with the actual offenders; he could only send a message which must be delivered by Rama Rajah himself.

More than once the latter had suspected that his mother reaped certain benefits from the position of her son. But he believed that she confined her acceptance to the small gifts which were permissible, possibly allowing herself a wider margin in the matter of butter, eggs, and country produce, than was quite compatible with the Government rule. But he trusted her, after having expressed his wishes so strongly, to refuse money and jewels.

The bangle upon the arm of his wife was a terrible revelation. Not only was his mother trading with his name, but his wife was joining in the illicit traffic. In addition to money she had accepted a valuable jewel, and by so doing had placed him in a serious and equivocal position. Such conduct must be stopped at once with a firm hand. His chief was lenient this time, knowing that he was ignorant of the transactions and opposed to anything of the kind. But now that his eyes were opened, Newent would confidently expect that there would be no recurrence of the offence. As he drove

home through the moonlit town, with its quaint low houses and the giant temple brooding in its midst, he determined to assert his authority as he had never done before. It was of no use appealing to his pleasure-loving lethargic father. He must take matters into his own hand, and oblige his ill-regulated family to feel his strength. They should learn his displeasure, and fully understand that he demanded reform.

He went straight to the women's quarters and the whole household heard what the young master had to say. There was no display of ungoverned wrath, no wild raging speech. He spoke quietly, sternly, and to the point, reproaching first his mother and secondly his wife. The bangle was upon her arm at the moment, and he removed it, whilst she did not dare to utter a word of protest.

The trouble of the afternoon had not vanished. Lukshmi, sulky and aggrieved, still smarted mentally and physically from the chastisement she had undergone. Nor had her mother-in-law recovered from her ill-humour. When the second and more serious storm burst upon them so unexpectedly it roused all the ill-feeling again.

At the mention of the bracelet his mother turned with surprise and re-awakened fury upon the girl. In shrill tones she declared her own innocence of the transaction. She admitted having seen the bangle, but she had rejected it. It was this vile snake of a girl who was the culprit. What did a few rupees matter compared with a handsome gold bangle like that? Nothing would have been said, no complaint would have been made, and the matter would never have come to the ears of the Collector if this daughter of a pig had not held out her greedy hand. Rama Rajah silenced her strident voice and repeated the warning uttered by his chief.

"Sooner than lose my appointment I would lose my mother and my wife," he declared in a tone that hushed them and struck awe to their hearts. "Listen, all of you. Understand that in this matter I will be obeyed; otherwise I will separate myself from you, and you shall one and all return to Tinnevelly. I will make another home for myself wherein you shall not

place a foot. I will marry again, choosing for myself, and my second wife shall take the position of the first. Her hand shall bar the door against those whom I forbid to enter."

It was a terrible threat which caused them to quail as they listened. With his Western education, his independent position, and his English friends, they could no longer rely upon the omnipotence of his caste and his nationality. They knew that it was within the bounds of possibility that he might separate himself from them, and even break his caste again.

Wild thoughts and still wilder suspicions darted through the fertile brain of Lukshmi as she stood trembling but rebellious, humbled but unrepentant, stifling with difficulty her rage and jealousy. If she had been the mother of his son would he have dared to have torn a jewel from her arm with cruel words of reproach? Would he have dreamed of banishing her from his presence? Would he have ventured to suggest that she might be supplanted? Hot tears flooded her eyes, and she shook with bitter sobs.

When he had finished speaking and had departed, their tongues were loosened and a perfect babel ensued. Loudest of all was the voice of the big mistress raised to shower reproof upon her daughter-in-law. The memory of her retaliation that very afternoon still rankled; and now to it was added the unheard-of impertinence of taking a present which the elder woman had not dared to accept. Truly her impudence was unbounded. Did she think that she was mistress? She should learn at once that there was but one mistress in the house, and that was the mother of the Assistant Collector, and the wife of the head of the family. What! a childless barren woman to dare to set herself up? She should be shown her place and kept there.

Lukshmi did not receive this torrent of abuse in silence. It was all this cursed blind woman's doing. There had been nothing but misfortune ever since she arrived. She had cast a spell over her husband upon whom madness had fallen. What did he mean by threatening to turn them all out of the house and to shut the door against them? She could see through

his designs. He intended to bring the Englishwoman into his house ; for her sake he would break his caste, and it was her hand that would bar the door against them. Let him beware lest he brought down upon himself a dire calamity. She might be a slave, a childless wife ; but, for all that, he should feel the weight of her displeasure.

No one listened to her ravings which were lost in the clamour and uproar. But the aunt, who was in the kitchen superintending the dishing up of the evening curry, heard the noise and dropped something into the savoury preparation which brought peace to the distraught household. By ten o'clock the talking ceased and the woes of the zenana were forgotten in deep dreamless sleep.

Before retiring to rest Doraswamy sought his son in his room.

"So the river begins to flow strongly between its banks ; and obstructing rocks are washed aside by the increasing strength of the current, my son," he observed with a smile.

"There is only one way of serving the British Government, and I have no wish to deviate from that path," replied the Assistant Collector, with a ring of determination in his voice which was not displeasing to his father.

"It is well that the women should know, like cows, the limit of their tether."

"And learn to respect that limit."

"But, my son, neither with the cows nor with our mothers and wives must the rope be too short. Who quarrels with the ryot's children for eating a few ears of the zemindar's corn ?"

"They are fully aware of what is required by the rules of my service."

"And those rules will be regarded by your mother. It is your wife who has transgressed beyond the bounds of common-sense. She has ever been the spoiled child of the family. My wife has been too much of a mother and too little of a mother-in-law, whilst you have been more like a father than a husband. A goad for a bullock, a whip for a horse, a chilly for a curry, and a rod for a child, or they are all spoiled."

With this counsel he left his son and went towards the women's quarters, calling for Seeta, the dancing-girl, to bring him tobacco. He troubled himself about nothing except the easy ministration to his own pleasures. He belonged to that large, unnumbered class, including all castes, who are content to wag the head in assent and leave to others the task to be up and doing.

The sun was above the horizon when Lukshmi opened her eyes. She cast aside the fine scented sheet in which she had wrapped herself for slumber, and looked up at her aunt who stood by her side with a cup of fragrant coffee in her hand. For some seconds her mind was a blank, but gradually as she swallowed the syrupy liquid memory returned. She handed the empty cup back and uttered the words with an interrogation in her tone—

“My husband?”

“He left as the sun looked over the tobacco fields.”

Lukshmi lay back again upon her pillows, stretching her young limbs luxuriously. The older woman set the cup upon the floor, and passed her hands with massaging touch over the supple body down to the ankles, laying her palm against the ball of each foot in turn and gently pressing back the ringed toes. Lukshmi surrendered herself to the sensuous pleasure, keenly appreciative of the soothing effect of the mesmeric passes. The fragments of her ill-humour melted away, and the natural joyousness of youth returned, asserting its recuperative power upon mind and body.

Suddenly the thought of the bracelet flashed upon her mind. She had taken a fancy to it in the belief that the green and gold were becoming to her brown skin, just as an English girl might have taken a liking for a particular ribbon because she was under the impression that it suited her complexion. A quick frown puckered her brow.

“My pretty bangle is gone and I shall never see it again,” she complained, confident of sympathy.

“Do not trouble, little one. You shall have another better than that before long.”

"I should like to push the Tahsildar into a well for his tale-bearing and leave him there to drown, swimming round and round like a rat in a chatty of water, breaking his nails in his frantic effort to claw his way out by the slimy, slippery walls——"

Her companion brought her hand down upon the satin skin with a slight slap.

"Be silent! perverse one; and talk not like a Malay murderer."

"Have no fear; it is out of my power to do the pig an injury. But when I am angry I love to picture to myself how I could take my revenge. If it were not the well, I might punish him grandly with the fire-stick;—his eyes, his arm-pits——"

"Ah, bah! such thoughts are evil; they go forth and the devils ride upon them to do their wickedness. It is not good to conjure up evil."

Lukshmi laughed scornfully.

"Do visions bring fulfilment of desire? When I am hungry I see luscious fruits, and when I am lonely I see an eager handsome husband who is blind to the charms of all other women. But they do not come with the thinking of them. I continue to eat the turpentine mango and the stupid plantain, and to see my still more stupid husband depart on the business of the Sirkar."

"Cease chattering, naughty one, and I will tell you a secret," whispered the aunt as she made a few final passes.

"A secret! speak, speak, my little mother. Tell it quickly to the poor ill-used childless wife."

"Did you not hear the tomtom this morning? Ah! lazy child! You were asleep when the swami's messenger came with beat of drum to let the big mistress know that the swami himself was coming in a few days' time to pay her a visit."

Lukshmi made no reply, but the light in her shining eyes was a testimony that she was not indifferent to the news. The coming of the guru, the private chaplain of the family, was an event that stirred the whole household to its innermost recesses.

With graphic and garrulous tongue, the older woman described the attractions of the new guru. He was tall and handsome like a sunflower. He was gracious, and his face shone upon those whom he favoured like the sun in its rising; above all, he was ready to grant the favour of the gods to those who pleased him.

It was pleasant to listen to the seductive talk of the woman with eyes half shut, and an imagination that was without any moral restraint. To think upon his holiness was an act of piety, and there was nothing wrong from the Hindu point of view in the indulgence of day-dreams.

When travelling round on his official visits, the guru claimed to be filled with the divine afflatus. All his actions were rendered righteous by it; and not a soul, from the master of the house to the youngest child in the zenana, dared to place any obstacle in the way of the fulfilment of his smallest desire. For the period of his stay, a time when the men of the family made themselves scarce, the entire house and all its inmates were at his service, and his humble slaves. And none was more willing, more eager to minister to his comfort and his happiness, than Rama Rajah's pretty young wife.

CHAPTER XI

A STRANGE GUEST

ON the evening of the day fixed for the visit of Rama Rajah and his wife, Mrs. Newent, having dined half an hour earlier than usual, awaited the arrival of her expected guests. Dolores and Miss Beauchamp sat with her in the drawing-room, but the Collector had been banished, lest his presence should alarm the shy bird decoyed into new social fields for the first time. He had gone to smoke and play billiards with the judge.

In honour of her guests, Mrs. Newent had had the verandah and portico decorated with Chinese lanterns, and the house was illuminated with an unusual number of lamps. A tray of jasmin wreaths was placed ready on the hall table, but no refreshments were provided, caste rules preventing the partaking of such at the hands of the English.

A carriage drove up before the hour previously arranged. The servants, being Pariahs, had had their orders to remain in the back-verandah, and to abstain scrupulously from showing themselves. At the sound of the horse's hoofs upon the gravel, Mrs. Newent, accompanied by Miss Beauchamp, went to the entrance hall and stood upon the threshold. The door of the carriage opened, and one of its occupants was somewhat unceremoniously pushed out by her companions. Miss Beauchamp moved forward into the verandah, but Mrs. Newent maintained her position at the threshold.

Among the Hindus strict etiquette is observed in the reception of a guest. According to his rank he is met in the drawing-room by the host, or at the threshold, or at the portico.

It was a concession on the part of Mrs. Newent to leave the drawing-room and advance as far as the hall, considering that her husband was senior in rank to the Assistant Collector. But she wished to show special honour to her guest on this occasion.

There were two other ladies in the carriage, but when they caught sight of Miss Beauchamp they leaned back in their seats as though to avoid being seen. Miss Beauchamp asked if they would not come in. She spoke in English, and was apparently not understood. There was no time to repeat the request. At a sign to the coachman the carriage was jerked forward and whirled into the darkness with its two occupants.

Miss Beauchamp led the way into the hall followed by the guest, who recovered her self-possession and exhibited no further sign of reluctance. Mrs. Newent came forward with outstretched hand and a pleasant smile of welcome. It was a pretty face that was lifted to hers, with the usual regular features that mark the higher castes; but it was devoid of intellectuality. The brown eyes dwelt upon the hostess with bold curiosity, and the full lips responded with a smile that showed a perfect set of white teeth. Her cloth was of rich soft silk of a delicate roseleaf pink, and it was worn over a petticoat of dahlia-coloured satin. Neck, arms, hair, fingers, and ankles were loaded with jewels, and the smooth skin upon which they shone was touched with saffron powder, through which the brown tones shone with the living warmth of her blood. Yes, there was no doubt about her being pretty.

Mrs. Newent expressed her pleasure in her own language, and endeavoured to show something of her gratification in her manner, but there was the difficulty of making herself understood. She felt the helplessness of the situation and longed for her husband, or even the ayah in the absence of any other kind of interpreter. But she dared not summon her faithful handmaid. The propinquity of pariah servants was one of the obstacles pleaded by native ladies and gentlemen of caste in the way of paying visits to Europeans.

Rama Rajah had promised to come at a certain hour. She

took out her watch. It wanted ten minutes to the hour. His wife was before the appointed time, but this was better than being too late. She was about to return the watch to its place when her guest laid inquisitive fingers upon it, evidently with the desire of examining it more closely. The bright colours of the enamelled back and the brilliant little star of diamonds set in the centre were fascinating. The jewels used by native goldsmiths are mostly uncut, and the diamond is dull and devoid of the beauty imparted to it by the expert European cutter.

Rama Rajah's wife held the watch face downwards in the palm of her hand, turning it to the light to catch the scintillating sparkle with the pleasure of a child. From the watch her eyes wandered to the bracelets, brooch and pendant worn by Mrs. Newent, who submitted them to close examination with the good-nature of a hostess desiring only to make her guest happy. It was a pleasant surprise to find the wife of the Assistant Collector so ready to be amused and so free from shyness.

All this time they were standing in the hall. Mrs. Newent presently turned to the tray of flowers, and with her own hands garlanded the native lady, an act of grace that was received with much giggling on the part of the latter. If shyness was absent so also was dignity. Her guest was behaving like a schoolgirl whose curiosity knew no bounds.

Having placed the jasmin wreath upon her neck, Mrs. Newent took her hand and led her to the drawing-room where Dolores sat upon an ottoman under the punkah. At the sound of approaching feet the blind girl rose and waited, putting out her hand as they came near.

Rama Rajah's wife glanced at the beautiful unseeing eyes, and shrank back with manifest aversion, withholding the hand that Dolores was expecting to clasp. The action surprised Mrs. Newent. Mistaking the reluctance for a sudden fit of awkwardness, she gently lifted the unwilling hand and laid it in that of Dolores. Not knowing how the native naturally shrinks from contact with anything that is maimed or imperfect, Mrs. Newent marvelled at the shudder that visibly ran through

the frame of the native lady as she felt the clasp of the white fingers.

Words of warm welcome poured from the lips of Dolores. They were incomprehensible to the ears of the person addressed but the tone was unmistakable. In the midst of her expressions of friendliness, Dolores checked herself, and with an unexpected movement placed her left hand over the brown fingers that she still gripped in her right. Quickly running her hand up the arm and over the neck of the shrinking figure, she felt her features and hair, little knowing that the touch of the left hand is deemed an indignity amounting to insult. The next moment she had unclasped the hand she held, whilst Rama Rajah's wife, with an abrupt movement and a nervous giggle, freed herself and made further contact impossible by placing a distance between herself and Dolores. The latter sank back upon the ottoman. Miss Beauchamp, ever mindful of her charge, leaned over her.

"Are you feeling ill, Loree?"

"No, thanks. I was startled."

"What has frightened you?"

Dolores put her off, assuring her that it was nothing of consequence, and asking her if Rama Rajah had arrived. Meanwhile Mrs. Newent had given her guest a seat upon a gilded chair of Louis Seize pattern. It was upholstered in bright tapestry and had been brought from her boudoir upstairs by her husband's direction, it being a mark of honour to offer the visitor the best seat in the room. The gilded glory of the Louis Seize chair ought to prove especially attractive to the native eye, he explained.

Having seated her guest, Mrs. Newent placed herself near and proceeded to provide amusement. She set in motion the mechanism of a gramophone ; but the lady's attention wandered frequently to the still face of the blind girl. She seemed fascinated and yet repelled by the eyes that looked towards her but yet saw nothing. Now and then she giggled inconsequently, not quite sure whether she was enjoying the fun, or whether she was frightened at the strange European ladies

whose language she could not understand. Dolores' attitude was also puzzling. She had been so eager for the visit, so anxious to meet Rama Rajah's wife again. But after the first greeting she had fenced herself in with reserved silence. Ungracious and rude Dolores could not be, but she was cold and unresponsive, exhibiting a strange determination not to be drawn into further speech whether it could be understood or not. Rama Rajah's wife, though frequently gazing at her with bold unconcealed curiosity, scrupulously avoided making any advances. The situation was becoming uncomfortable.

Mrs. Newent, seeing that the gramaphone failed to hold the attention of her guest, stopped the noisy discords and cast about for a new attraction. She started a musical box, the strains of which were more acceptable to her own ear whatever they might be to the ears of the other listeners.

The air was a minuet with a marked movement and rhythm. Its regular measure struck the ear of the restless girl and caught her attention. She listened with head turned and body motionless, like some beautiful animal surprised and fascinated by an unusual sound. Her hands that had rested upon her lap were lifted and swung gently in unison with the measure.

Springing up under an impulse she could not control she posed with a soft sinuous motion before the instrument. Gradually her whole body pulsed to the music and swayed with voluptuous grace and abandonment to the rhythm. Arms, hands, head, as well as body, were instinct with the sensuous spirit of dance. Yet the feet scarcely moved. Only the heels seemed to stir in gentle beats to the time as they struck the ground, sending up waves of graceful undulations through the lithe young body that reached the very finger-tips. The motion was suggestive of a living palm-tree swayed in the morning breeze and trembling to the ends of its green fronds with perfect life in the brilliant sunshine.

Mrs. Newent and Miss Beauchamp looked on in blank astonishment. The former, knowing more about the ways of native ladies than the latter, could scarcely believe her eyes.

The large doors and windows of the drawing-room were open and admitted the soft night air. The garden was silent except for the cicadas. From the distant town came now and then the thrum of the tomtoms proclaiming a marriage or a death. Far away in the tobacco fields the prolonged note of the jackal echoed as the animal searched for its precarious meal. The roll of the rubber-tyred wheels of Rama Rajah's carriage made no sound, but Dolores caught the thud of hoofs upon the drive. She moved as though she would spring to her feet, but became still again under the influence of that great patience she had learned to practise in her world of darkness.

In accordance with their orders the servants did not come forward to receive the visitor, and Rama Rajah walked in unannounced. He wore the evening dress of an Englishman except for a small neat turban of gold embroidered muslin closely folded about his head by the deft fingers of Jaganath. The head-dress added dignity to the wearer and marked his nationality.

He crossed the threshold, his English shoes making no sound on the grass matting. Dolores alone of the group was aware of his presence. As the scene met his eye he paused abruptly, astonishment written on every feature. Then, with rapid steps, he strode towards Mrs. Newent, who rose from her seat.

"You are welcome," she exclaimed joyfully. "We cannot get on without an interpreter."

But he made no response to her warm greeting. His eyes were fixed upon the figure that at sight of him had ceased dancing and had dropped back into the gilded seat of honour. The girl, in no way abashed by the lowering expression of those eyes, returned his glance boldly, impudently, and again giggled in undignified fashion. He spoke to her in Tamil imperiously, threateningly. She replied, tossing her head in the air as she too rose to her feet and faced him defiantly. Mrs. Newent, gazing from husband to wife and back again at the incensed husband, was completely puzzled ; whilst Dolores, strangely agitated, stood by the ottoman beneath the punkah,

waiting for an opportunity to speak. Again he addressed the lady in his own tongue, and as she listened, nervously fingering the necklace on her heaving bosom, her bold spirit quailed. Had she carried the farce too far? He ceased, and there was silence which was broken by Dolores, whose voice was sharp and clear.

“Rama Rajah, where is your wife?”

“The gods alone know. This woman is not my wife.”

“Then who is she?” asked Mrs. Newent, regarding her guest with a sternness that extinguished the foolish and irritating laugh, half nervous, half impudent, with which the girl was meeting the situation.

Rama Rajah did not reply. It was impossible to tell Mrs. Newent that this was none other than Seeta the dancing girl. His hostess put another question as her eye swept keenly over the jewelled figure.

“Is the lady known to you?”

“She is one of my father’s household.”

“But not your wife?”

“No!” he thundered, with an abrupt blaze of anger. “She has been personating my wife, however, a picce of impertinence that shall not go unpunished.”

He dropped into Tamil again, and this time his words stung; for ready tears began to flow, and there were signs of real alarm upon the careless pretty face. He took her by the arm and led her to the hall, Mrs. Newent and Miss Beauchamp following. As they moved towards the portico the tears ceased to flow and the unbidden guest recovered her self-assurance. He called for his carriage, which was waiting a few yards from the portico, and giving her no time to make the farewell salaam, which she intended to offer to the English lady, he hustled her unceremoniously into the carriage. Closing the door he ordered the coachman to drive home quickly, an order the man obeyed. At her own request, however, she was dropped at the gateway of the house. She was desirous of creeping in quietly without being seen by the big mistress, who was entirely ignorant of the escapade.

As the carriage drove off Rama Rajah ran up the steps of the portico and joined Mrs. Newent and Miss Beauchamp, who were awaiting him in the hall eager for an explanation of the mystery. The rapidity with which he had acted was bewildering. Before they had had time to realize the situation the impostor had vanished. What did it all mean? and who was the lady?

Rama Rajah could not summon up sufficient courage to divulge the identity of the girl. His blood tingled with shame at the insult which had been put upon the wife of his superior officer, a man whom he held in the highest esteem. Mrs. Newent had received, with all the honour it was possible to show to a lady of good social position, a disreputable temple girl, the plaything of his father and of the household, a girl whose mere presence was an offence in the eye of an English woman. His tongue refused to utter her name, and he again evaded the question.

"My wife's courage must have failed her at the last moment; and, not daring to disappoint you of a guest, she has sent a—a"—he hesitated not knowing what to call her—"a visitor who happened to be staying in the house. She is so ignorant of European ways that she probably thought that it would give you less offence to send a substitute than to leave you without a guest."

"Perhaps that was what the lady tried to tell us when she arrived, but we could not understand her," replied Mrs. Newent, kindly.

Rama Rajah knew well enough that Seeta had no intention whatever of disclosing her identity. On the contrary, she had reckoned on his aid in the preservation of the secret.

"I am sorry that I did not arrive with my wife. I might have driven close behind her carriage and have persuaded her to come in," observed Rama Rajah, regretfully.

"Then she did come?"

"My mother saw her drive away in company with my aunt."

He plunged into profuse apologies, handsome and manly

in his distress, and in his endeavour to excuse his wife on the score of her ignorance and childishness. Mrs. Newent hastened to reassure him. It was no fault of his that he was placed in such an awkward position, and however much she and her husband might be disturbed by the incident, they had too great a sense of justice to accuse him of complicity.

"We must explain matters to Dolores, whom we have forsaken," remarked Mrs. Newent, when she had somewhat eased his mind.

"Let me go and make my own excuses and plead forgiveness," he begged eagerly.

"By all means, and I will retire to my boudoir upstairs. Will you come with me, Miss Beauchamp?"

She guessed rightly that, just now when he was sore at heart, he would prefer to make those apologies on behalf of the wilful girl without the presence of a third person. They moved away towards the wide staircase leading out of the hall, and Rama Rajah returned to the drawing-room.

Dolores had spoken but once during that moment of recognition, and her words had indicated the fact that she, and she alone of the three ladies, had guessed the truth. Deprived of sight her other senses, as has been already related, were doubly acute. As the ordinary individual with the possession of eyes remembers a face once seen, so she recalled a voice once heard and the form and features with which her fingers had come into contact. Neither Miss Beauchamp nor Mrs. Newent had ever seen Rama Rajah's wife; and though they felt now and then that the manner of their guest was peculiar, the suspicion did not enter their minds, as the certainty had entered that of Dolores, that the guest was otherwise than they supposed. When the revelation came and Rama Rajah had replied, with almost brutal emphasis, "This woman is not my wife," the shock was less than it would have been had she been totally unprepared. After his words of repudiation, she dropped back into her seat and waited until the moment should arrive when the mystery might be explained. She heard him speaking to Mrs. Newent

in the hall, and then his footsteps approached the drawing-room alone. He came straight up to where she sat, and, standing before her, he said—

“Ranee, can you ever forgive the insult my wife has offered to you and to your hostess, Mrs. Newent?”

The voice she loved had a pathetic ring of mortification in it that pierced her heart.

“I am sorry for you, Rajah; not for myself. The disappointment to us is nothing compared with the pain she has caused you.”

He poured forth his regrets, explaining how Lukshmi had been seen off by his mother with a suitable chaperone, and never a doubt had arisen but that the visit would be properly paid under the wing of the lady who had gone with her.

“At the last moment her heart must have failed her and she sent in her chaperone alone,” said Dolores, adding, however, “But the hand I held and the face I touched were those of a young woman, as young as your wife. Was she the relative?”

“The person who came was not a relative.”

“Then who was she?”

“A girl who is staying for a time in the house.”

The words came unwillingly and again the wave of shame swept over him.

“The girl your mother desires to make your second wife?”

“No! no! not that. Oh! Ranee, don’t torture me by asking for explanations which I cannot give. It is impossible for you to understand the intricacies of our family life, and I cannot explain them. They are inexplicable to European ears. Just let me say how sorry I am, how I regret the occurrence, how I deplore my wife’s folly. Let me kneel at your feet, Ranee, as I used to do when I was a boy in your father’s house and had erred; and let me pray for forgiveness.”

He dropped upon his knees before her and placed his hands together upon her lap in the old position when he

sought pardon and consolation after reproof in his early days. The attitude touched her acutely and brought back sudden memories of days gone by. She closed her hands over his and the tears sprang into her eyes as she murmured brokenly over his bowed head—

“There is nothing to forgive, Rajah.”

“It was a gross insult to my best friend, the greatest insult that could be offered. Forgive, Ranee !”

There was silence, and again he pleaded : “Forgive me, Ranee, forgive !”

“I forgive,” she whispered as she leaned over the bowed figure.

With a sudden impulse she took his head in her hands and gently kissed him on the forehead as she had more than once kissed the boy in supreme moments of sorrow and repentance years before, when he had come to her inconsolable and overwhelmed with self-reproach.

Silence reigned between them, the silence of a loving sympathy too full to speak on one side, and of a sore distressed spirit that bordered on despair on the other.

CHAPTER XII

MISCHIEF

IN the compounds or grounds of the Indian houses occupied by Europeans there is plenty of space for gardens, lawns, tennis-courts, terraced walks, and for groups of noble trees which afford a welcome shade from the sun during the day or from the heavy dew at night. Messengers, who bring letters, and servants, who wait their masters' pleasure with the horses and carriages that are a necessity in the tropics, seek the shade of the trees and rest contentedly on the warm dry soil, gossiping together or dozing the time away.

When Seeta, the dancing girl, was greeted by Miss Beau-champ and conducted up the steps as an honoured guest, the carriage containing her two companions passed on and drew up not far from the stables under a spreading banyan tree. The syce was directed to open the carriage door ; and Lukshmi, her gold embroidered silk hidden in the enveloping folds of a dark red-brown cloth, stepped out. Her companion followed unbidden and there was an altercation at a little distance from the carriage. Lukshmi wished to make her exploration alone, and to this the chaperone objected. The elder lady was fully aware of her responsibility with regard to the wife of the Assistant Collector, and she was already disturbed by the unexpected deviation from the programme sketched out by Rama Rajah's mother.

At the gateway of their own house they had picked up Seeta, and during the drive to the Collector's there had been a hasty transference of the jewelry with which Lukshmi had been adorned by her mother-in-law.

On arrival instead of Lukshmi entering to pay the promised visit, the dancing girl had been pushed out to play the part assigned to her. And now the headstrong girl would wander alone and unattended in the compound of the Englishman ! It was not to be permitted, and the elder lady caught her charge by the wrist and forcibly detained her.

"Let me go ! Let me go, you hateful old monkey ! If you don't I will bite you !" cried Lukshmi, furiously angry.

"I must answer to your husband's mother for all your mad pranks. You are a monkey yourself and a bad one too ! It is a pity that your husband gives himself no time to use the stick. No, it is of no use struggling. You stay here, or I come with you."

"Then come, you daughter of a village pig, you granddaughter of a shoe-maker !"

She dragged herself free by a sudden movement and ran towards the house. The moon, now in its waning, had not yet risen and the garden was dark. Lukshmi's companion, drawing her cloth over her head, followed closely, terrified lest she should tread upon a snake, or catch sight of a devil lurking with sinister purpose amongst the luxuriant foliage of the shrubs. With trembling lips she anathematized the girl for her daring outrageous escapade, as she contemplated the storm of wrath which would assuredly descend upon their heads if it were discovered.

Undeterred by any such thoughts herself, Lukshmi made her way to where the lights shone brightly through the open doors of the drawing-room. Creeping up under the shadow of the foliage plants that stood round the base of the house, she chose a position from which she had a full view of the group that was gathered beneath the swaying punkah. The punkahman, half asleep over his mechanical task, sat with his back to the garden, under a little erection of mats which hid him from sight, and at the same time screened him from the night air. Except for him the verandah was deserted.

Lukshmi's sharp young eyes devoured every detail. The foolish giggle of Seeta found an echo within her heart, and

her shoulders shook with silent scornful laughter as she noted the wreath of jasmin flowers round the neck of the dancing girl, and caught sight of the gilded seat of honour upon which she sat. She observed with intense satisfaction the undisguised efforts of the Collector's wife to amuse and interest her guest. Far from being appreciative, Lukshmi gloried maliciously in the misplaced graciousness. Ah ! if the lady only knew that she was entertaining a temple girl ! It would teach her not to demand the attendance of the wife of her husband's subordinate upon herself ! Yes ! She knew why that demand had been made. It was for her own honour that Mrs. Newent had commanded her to come ; and she had added to the indignity by sending the message by the blind woman.

Lukshmi almost wished that Seeta would declare her identity. She longed passionately to witness the mortification and vexation that could not fail to be shown upon the faces of the three ladies when they learned the humiliating fact that they had been duped.

During the uncomfortable period when Dolores sat dumb, pierced with a horrible suspicion that amounted to moral certainty, and whilst Miss Beauchamp and Mrs. Newent were throwing pearls before the unworthy one in their endeavours to entertain her, the wife of the Assistant Collector was revelling in the situation. But the chaperone was not so happy. With distracted whispers she entreated her charge to be sensible and to return to the safety of the carriage. In the middle of her protestations, Rama Rajah arrived, and his appearance silenced the anxious woman. Lukshmi was also suddenly sobered. The scornful smile vanished, and she became motionless and watchful like an animal of the feline species.

The scene that followed was easy to comprehend, although the words uttered by her husband did not reach the ears that were strained to catch them. She too, like Seeta, had fully relied upon his silence and the preservation of the secret. He would not dare to expose his own family, however

much he disapproved of the action. But if he did not screen it, it was of no consequence. She shrugged her shoulders with careless indifference. He might scold, but scolding broke no bones.

When it became evident that he had not maintained the silence upon which she had reckoned, she caught her breath in an ecstasy of wicked delight as she thought she read in the still figure of Dolores the annoyance and vexation at the insult. As for the discomfiture of the dancing girl, she regarded it with diabolical glee, and she followed her summary dismissal and departure in Rama Rajah's carriage with intense satisfaction. It would efface any assumption of pride which might have been engendered by having been garlanded and seated upon a golden chair. Again her companion tugged at her cloth.

"Come back to the carriage and let us go home, wicked girl! Surely some devil has entered your heart, and you will bring yourself and me to great harm."

"Peace, old grumbler! Let us see the fun to the end. Now the lady, cursed of the gods, will shower reproaches on my foolish husband, and the wife of the Collector will drive him forth with abuse."

There was a little talk within the hall when she almost lost sight of Rama Rajah and the two ladies. So she moved away from the vicinity of the portico, to which she had been drawn in her desire to see what became of Seeta, and returned to her point of vantage from which she could obtain an uninterrupted view of the drawing-room.

Rama Rajah entered the room alone and walked towards Dolores, his eyes fixed upon her face with the earnest gaze of a man who sees nothing else but the one object of his thoughts. For a few minutes he stood before her. Even though the sound of his voice came faintly and indistinctly upon the air, Lukshmi guessed how he was moved to the very foundation of his being. She looked eagerly for the outburst of wrath and the storm of invective which it seemed to her mind—inexperienced as she was in the ways of English ladies—must

burst upon his head. But instead there was gentle speech and soft, tender bearing that spoke of pity and sympathy.

Again a violent uncontrollable wave of jealousy raged within her. The passion mastered every other emotion and banished prudence. Her companion, standing close behind her, was prepared to act in an emergency. Noting the heaving bosom and quivering frame silhouetted sharply against the light, she drew a step nearer and put forth a ready hand. It was as well. As Rama Rajah fell on his knees before Dolores, his maddened, passionate wife gnashed her teeth, and would have darted forward to curse the Englishwoman, for the spell that she had laid upon him, and possibly to do some bodily harm with teeth and nails.

But her companion held her fast. There was a struggle ; the older woman had greater strength of sinew, and in her terror of discovery she drew her charge away from the house. A pot or two of ferns were knocked over ; but the noise did not attract the attention of the couple in the drawing-room, wrapped up as they were in their own emotions. Lukshmi was dragged along and pushed into the carriage, where her curses and abuse rapidly changed into a wild outburst of tears. The lamps were quickly lighted, and a minute later they were being whirled homewards, passing on their way the empty brougham which was returning for Rama Rajah.

Anglo-Indians keep early hours. Ambrose Newent having played a game or two of billiards and smoked a couple of cigars, came back about ten o'clock. As he mounted the steps under the portico to the verandah he met his Assistant on the point of departing. He greeted him heartily.

"Well, Rama Rajah, I hope the visit passed off successfully. Your ladies have gone home by this time of course, and my presence will give no offence."

"They left some time ago. Good night, sir."

He stood at the entrance of his house watching his guest depart, and as the brougham drove away he thought how harassed and worried he appeared.

"I must make him take three months' privilege leave, and

break up that precious family party with which he is hampered. They had far better return to their ancestral acres, and leave him to follow his profession in peace."

His wife descended the staircase, followed by Miss Beauchamp, and together they went into the drawing-room.

"How did you get on to-night with your guest?" he asked, looking round generally but addressing his wife.

"Not as well as I could have wished. I am afraid it was a complete failure," she replied, with a little sigh.

"A failure! How was that?"

"Rama Rajah's wife did not come. An extraordinary thing occurred. I don't know if it is customary among themselves to do such things. She sent a substitute."

Mrs. Newent described the events of the evening, and her husband listened with a face that grew more serious as he grasped the details of the story.

"Who was she?" he inquired, when she had finished her tale. Although he asked the question, he knew its answer better than his wife.

"Rama Rajah did not say."

"She was a visitor, a girl who was staying in the house," explained Dolores, who went on to assure him that Rama Rajah's mother had no part in the deception. It was entirely due to his wife and this girl, who seemed to have behaved in a thoughtless, irresponsible manner, to the confusion of the family.

Newent listened attentively. He was better acquainted with the domestic life of native gentlemen than his wife, although he did not know everything. There was only one class of girl not related by blood ties who paid visits to wealthy families, and who were given to posing, and that was the temple girl. He inquired how she was dressed, and his only comment was thoroughly British.

"What infernal impudence!"

"You must not be angry with Rama Rajah," pleaded Dolores. "He was vexed beyond measure, and was full of apologies. I am afraid that I have been the cause of all

the trouble, as I was so persistent in my desire to see Rama Rajah's wife, and to show her, if possible, some attention."

"Do not blame yourself, Dolores. We have all acted with the best intentions, and Rama Rajah is not to blame either in the matter. But it convinces me of one fact, and that is the mistake we make in trying to impose reform upon the Hindu before the desire for it is awakened." He turned to his wife. "I am sorry that you have been troubled by the incident. Don't give it another thought. We will make no more attempts at exchanging visits with our Hindu neighbours until they express a wish for the honour themselves."

Although to his wife the Collector made light of the trick which had been played upon her, and begged her not to think any more about it, he did not allow it to pass without further inquiry and comment.

The very next morning he sought Rama Rajah at the Kucherî, where the business of Government was transacted, and questioned him about the occurrence. The Assistant Collector made no attempt to palliate the delinquency of his wife, but admitted that the person sent in response to Mrs. Newent's invitation was none other than Seeta, the dancing girl. Again he tendered his apologies. There was no servility in his request for pardon; but whilst acknowledging the offence that had been committed, and proffering his apologies on behalf of his family, he maintained a dignity of bearing that belonged to his caste and commanded respect. Newent was conscious of this attitude in his Assistant all through the interview, and thought with regret of the ignorance, the limitless want of knowledge of European social laws, on the part of the Indian ladies amongst whom this man must pass his days. If the West could do so much for the social advance of the high caste man, what might it not do for the woman, with her keener perceptions and greater power of adaptability? That it could not be forced upon her he had had convincing proof in the action of Lukshmi. He felt that reform was impossible until the higher caste women, with their vast capabilities, asked

for the teaching that would make them dignified, refined, and gracious in speech and action.

"It is difficult for me to manage my family," Rama Rajah remarked at the conclusion of his apology. "My father is the head of the house, and I have very little real authority with either my wife or my mother."

"Cannot he help you?"

"He is too careless and indifferent. He detests trouble of any kind. If he counsels me at all it is to advise a compromise, and the adoption of a less rigid line of conduct."

"There is only one way of serving Government, as I have remarked more than once."

"And it is my great desire to follow that way," rejoined Rama Rajah, with convincing earnestness.

There was a pause, during which Newent's eyes searched the high-bred face before him, a face that was prematurely ageing under the burden laid upon the young shoulders.

"You have of course expressed your disapproval of the act of courtesy."

"Certainly, and the dasi has been sent back to the temple in disgrace, whilst my mother has reproved my wife."

There was another pause and Rama Rajah was prepared to leave his chief's room and seek his own department. But the sign of dismissal, without which the etiquette of his nation does not permit a Hindu to take his leave, was not forthcoming. Newent had something more to say, and the subject was not pleasant. It virtually amounted to another accusation of bribery. When he had explained the case, and shown him the letter in which the accusation was formulated, he gave Rama Rajah an opportunity of denying it, or at least of excusing himself. But neither excuse nor denial were forthcoming. All he said was—

"It may be true; it probably is true."

"Have you represented to your family how detrimental such conduct is to your prospects?"

"Yes; and what is more, I threatened to break up the

household if I detected any of them offending again in the same manner, and to separate myself from them."

"It seems to me that it will be your only course."

The haggard expression deepened, and Newent felt a throb of pity for him. Carefully avoiding anything that might seem dictatorial, he set himself to consider how matters might be remedied. Fettered as Rama Rajah was by the members of his family, there was no other way apparently of putting a stop to the malpractices than by breaking up the family circle. He must take three months' privilege leave, said Newent, and spend it in Tinnevelly, re-establishing the family on the estate. At the end of his leave he must return alone. If there was any inclination to follow him, he must make up his mind to be transferred to an acting appointment, the temporary nature of which would justify him in not taking a house, and thus he might prevent his family from congregating round him.

Rama Rajah agreed, but suggested that there were many difficulties in the way of keeping himself free from the various relatives who, according to the Hindu custom, considered that they had a right to live under his roof. It would be a new departure to bar the door against them; but he had threatened to do so if they drove him to extreme measures. His father would not willingly leave Madura while his son had a house there. He found the life of the town more amusing than the purely agricultural life on the estate. He had friends here, and liked being present at the ceremonies which were so frequently taking place at the temple.

"I understood that your parents were anxious to return to Tinnevelly."

"With me as Assistant Collector."

"Oh! I see," replied Newent, who needed no further enlightenment.

"I will apply for leave at once," said Rama Rajah, coming to a sudden decision. "How soon do you think I can be relieved?"

"In a fortnight or three weeks' time."

"In that case I shall let the gentleman who relieves me

adjust the dispute over the enlargement of the channel that irrigates the village of Shorapore."

"Ah yes, do ; and he may as well settle this other trouble. Perhaps he will be able to convince some of these foolish ryots that the remission of the kist upon their land on account of the failure of the rains is not to be purchased."

Newent made some inquiries concerning the channel at Shorapore which conducted water from a tank that had been considerably enlarged. A rich zemindar on the other side of it was anxious to secure the whole benefit of the tank enlargement to the exclusion of the smaller landowners at Shorapore, so that he might bring some waste land under cultivation. There were other questions also to be settled ; one being a quarrel between two factions of a certain caste as to which should perform the ceremonies and administer the revenues of a temple by the river. Rama Rajah gave an outline of the claims, and had the history of the endowment from its beginning at his fingers' ends. His judgment was clear and just, and he had a deeper insight into the matter than any Englishman could hope to gain.

As he listened Newent thought again with regret of the fetters and trammels with which so able a Government servant was hampered in the execution of his duty. His Western education enabled Rama Rajah to rise superior to the bribery temptations offered by those whom he ruled. But he was compromised on all sides by his family, who knew nothing of Western culture, except that it opened the door to the higher Government appointments. Wrapped in the darkness of a thousand years, they were ignorant of the ideals that had been set before his eyes. Probably if they had received the same education and had been brought under the same influences at an early age, they would have understood, and would have endeavoured to act differently. The Hindu, with his sensitive and highly strung nature, is peculiarly impressionable and receptive ; but he is not always strong enough in character to put into practice the theories that commend themselves to his intelligence. Rama Rajah was making the attempt. Sobraon

Rao, in his way, was struggling against the old laws. The former fully recognized the difficulties that were strewn in his path, difficulties that were more formidable than those faced by the practical old tobacco merchant. Sobraon Rao followed his own code of reform, whereas Rama Rajah was endeavouring to follow the higher code of the foreigner.

Newent sighed as he thought of the future. How could this temporary escape from responsibility help him? The life of the civil servant in India is made up of such things. If these cases were arranged before Rama Rajah returned, others would arise where those interested would firmly believe that their ends might best be gained by offering bribes. There would still be the appointment of village officers, the assessing of kist—the rent of the land under cultivation—and adjudicating in revenue affairs. There would be the settlement of the never-ending caste disputes and the differences over boundaries and irrigation. In all these matters the people believed, in spite of repeated evidence to the contrary, that judgment went in favour of the highest bidder. It was an inherited faith, bequeathed to them by a hundred generations of forefathers, who lived under the rule of native princes.

As Rama Rajah left the room to go back to his work, Newent's eyes followed his upright figure, and he said to himself—

“When that kind of man is the rule and not the exception in the land, then and only then will India be able to stand by herself.”

CHAPTER XIII

GENTLE SUASION

THE heat was daily increasing, and arrangements were made for the departure of Mrs. Newent and her guests for the Pulney Hills where a house had been secured. Fortunately Dolores did not suffer from the warmer weather. Compelled by circumstances to lead an inactive life, she remained under the punkah amusing herself with her Braille type, or listening to Miss Beauchamp as she read aloud. Visitors were always welcome, and the English residents showed much kindness in calling upon her, and chatting of the trivial doings of the station by way of amusing her.

One of the pleasures of the day to which Dolores looked forward, was the visit paid without fail by Veerama, up to the moment when she had announced the intention of her mother to marry her. Since that day she had not appeared, but letters had been received daily making some excuse for her absence. At first Dolores accepted the excuses and merely replied begging her to come as soon as possible. But when several days elapsed without bringing Veerama she began to feel uneasy. What were they doing? Was that terrible mysterious ceremonial, the restoration of caste being performed? She asked Mr. Newent if he could help her to discover what was wrong. He succeeded through his peons in ascertaining the fact that Sobraon was still away at Dindigul, detained by a dispute with the cultivators of the tobacco. They added that the daughter of the house was said to be sick with fever.

This news only increased the anxiety of Dolores, and she wrote at once to inquire if it were true. Veerama replied that

she was quite well and that she had had no fever, but not a word was said as to a visit. Partly reassured but still much puzzled, Dolores sent a letter to Desika asking him to call upon her. The following morning she was seated in the verandah when a clatter of hoofs caused her to lift an inquiring face to Miss Beauchamp.

Accompanied by two outriders, who wore a nondescript uniform of native pattern, Desika drove up to the Collector's house with all the swagger and assurance of a native princelet of the old days. A pair of showy arabs drew the barouche in which he sat; and upon the footboard at the back stood two servants bearing long white wands of office with a profuse display of gold upon their persons.

Desika was dressed in a suit of European clothes of the latest fashion, and had decorated his person with jewelry. He stepped down from his carriage with an assumption of royal condescension which amused no one more than his flippant self. His obsequious attendants scrambled down from their perch and stood on each side of the steps bowing low as he passed them. Signing to the pariah servants belonging to the house to keep their distance, he slowly approached the ladies in the verandah, inwardly regretting that Miss Loree could not see him with her own eyes.

"I have come at last, Miss Loree, to pay you my visit, and if you will conduct me into the house I shall have much pleasure in holding conversation with you."

His formal speech and ridiculous manner made her laugh. His accent had not improved and he seemed to have lost the idiom of the English language although his fluency was in no way diminished. With Miss Beauchamp's assistance Desika was conducted into the drawing-room and offered the best seat that the room afforded to his intense gratification.

"I am sorry that Veerama has not been able to pay me a visit lately. I have missed her sadly," remarked Dolores.

"My sister is much engaged in the consideration of her approaching marriage. We only await my father's return from Dindigul to proceed with the preliminary ceremonies."

His high-pitched voice and lofty pose brought a smile to her lips. It reminded her of the old days at Maidenhead, when she used to listen to his flowery speeches that sounded so imposing but meant so little.

"I understood Veerama to say that your father was expected home three days ago."

"He was unable to conclude the business that took him down to Dindigul as soon as he hoped."

"Business connected with the tobacco, I suppose?" she observed.

"It is connected with the work in the tobacco fields."

"I thought that was your province, and that you superintended all the operations there."

"So I did," admitted Desika. "But the fact is that I have not the patience of my father with the ryots. I gave directions that the leaves were to be harvested in a certain manner. They chose to disobey me. What could I do, Miss Loree, but chastise them? I ordered my servants to beat half a dozen of the ring-leaders, and the miscreants threatened to bring the matter into Court. Imagine to what a pass things are coming under this futile English Government, when the ryot can run in his employer and patron in consequence of a well-merited correction! My father was fortunately in time to prevent legal proceedings being taken, and he is settling the affair out of Court, giving the rascals compensation instead of the additional thrashing they deserve."

Dolores laughed; it was impossible to take Desika seriously.

"But are you not a reformer preaching liberty for all?" she asked.

"To be sure," he replied promptly. "And as soon as I put my theories into practice and exercise the liberty we employers of labour claim, I am warned by an autocratic Government that I shall find myself in quod if I use the stick too freely."

Dolores listened with amusement to his airy inconsistencies, and remarked on the impropriety of taking the law into his own

hands. She also expressed a hope that he did not do the ryots any bodily harm when he beat them, and she recommended him not to attempt such drastic measures in the future.

As a matter of fact the irregular despotic performances of the young congress-wallah had not been trivial in their effects by any means. His father, with more than one sigh and shake of the head, was endeavouring to patch up the breach caused by the high-handed proceedings of his son among the cultivators at Dindigul. Not only had they resented his harsh treatment, but they had taken their revenge by destroying some of the hypothecated tobacco crop. On inquiry Sobraon discovered that there had been great provocation, and he was anxious to smooth matters over without the intervention of the law and the much-dreaded police. The ryots, though justly irritated,—and not without blame—had an equal dread of police interference, and were willing to settle the business out of Court; but it took endless palavers to arrive at a satisfactory arrangement by which broken skins were mended, and his own special methods of harvesting the leaf and curing it were instituted. It was this that detained him, and gave Veerama's mother the opportunity to press the marriage upon her daughter.

The mind of Dolores was too full of her *protégée's* welfare to be occupied with the grievances of the ryots; and as soon as he had come to an end of his dissertation on liberty from his own point of view, she said—

“Now tell me about your sister and this marriage. From all I hear it is not a suitable match for an Indian lady who has received an education like Veerama's.”

“Pardon me, Miss Loree, if I venture to contradict you. It is a most suitable match. The claimant for her hand has plenty of money and is of good standing.”

“Possibly his position may be all that you desire. I am considering the personality of the man himself. He is middle-aged and has a wife already.”

“Two conditions that in no way disqualify him as a suitor,” asserted Desika, eagerly.

“He is uneducated,” objected Dolores.

"But he is nevertheless a shrewd, astute man of business, and well-informed in all matters that concern his calling."

"All the same he is no companion for Veerama," she urged.

"A Hindu lady does not look for a companion in the person of her husband. To her he is the father of her children and the master of the house."

"You were educated in England, Desika; I should have expected more advanced theories from you on marriage. You call yourself a reformer, and so does your father; yet you are trying to enforce one of the worst rules of your caste."

"My father and I are both reformers, but we are by no means agreed. He is a social reformer. I desire political reform. He would relax the laws of caste and adopt some of your Western ways. I cling with all the patriotism of my nature to the time-honoured social rules of our nation. What I demand is justice and the right to govern ourselves."

He launched forth into the kind of peroration which he was accustomed to fulminate from the platform, and it was some time before Dolores could bring him back to the subject of his sister's marriage.

"Why doesn't she come and see me as usual?" she asked, when his flow of words ceased.

"We, my mother and I, wish her to respect the feelings of our caste people. Next month she will have to play an important part in the ceremonies of my own wedding, for which it will be absolutely necessary to restore her caste. My mother has chosen my bride for me. It was my father's wish that I should make the choice for myself, and at one time I thought perhaps I might do so. But I did not realize the difficulties. How could I go hanging about the doors of the zenanas, prying and asking the questions which for centuries have been put by the old female match-maker whose profession it is to arrange our marriages? My father has the best intentions in the world, but his ideas are chimerical and unpractical. My future wife is twelve years of age, and shows promise of being able to perform all her duties. Up to the present I have not seen her, but I am perfectly satisfied."

Dolores sighed as she made answer. "Ah, well, it may be all right for you and your bride; but in Veerama's case it is all wrong. You have not yet explained why she is prevented from seeing me."

"Oh, have I not, Miss Loree? The reason is obvious. If her caste is to be restored, the first step towards it is to cease being too intimate with those who do not belong to her caste. Here she not only eats with you and the Collector and his wife, but she frequently meets Rama Rajah."

There was a pause, and he noted the delicate colour that suffused her cheeks as she replied—

"They meet only in my presence."

"It would be better if they did not meet at all. You think me hard and unkind, but you do not understand the conditions of our life. Rama Rajah is my friend, as you know, but I do not forget that he belongs to that pretentious Vellala caste. It is not good that the contemptuous eyes of a Vellalan—even though he be my friend—should rest upon a Shanar girl."

It was in vain that Dolores remonstrated and argued. Desika was courteous, sometimes flippant, but determined throughout.

"I shall appeal to your father as soon as he returns," she cried at last, with the nearest approach to impatience that was possible to one whose whole life was one long exercise of patience and resignation.

He merely laughed and said, "My poor father! His hands are full, picking up the oranges that his children upset from the baskets he has given them to carry. Twenty-five years ago he was a leader of reform. To-day he is obsolete, and the gods laugh."

He took his departure, assuring her once again that his sister was well and happy, except for the fact that she could not come to see Miss Loree. She had her books and other occupations with which she amused herself. He promised to give a number of kind messages, and he drove away with the clank and clatter of two out-riders, the noise and dust of iron-tyred wheels and the shouts of attendants, who believed that it

added to their young master's dignity for them to clear the road of an imaginary crowd from the moment the barouche started to the time when they arrived in the town where the crowd actually existed.

Desika possessed the complacency and self-confidence of the modern Hindu, who has taken violently to politics, but he was neither cruel nor vicious at heart. He might order corporal punishment to be administered to his dependents and *employés*, but it was not with any desire to gloat over their sufferings. He thought no more of their bodily pain than the careless bullock-driver thinks of the pain he inflicts by the use of the goad. His oppression was the result of the autocratic temper of the Oriental, whose aim is to attain his end without thought of the means employed, and to maintain his own prestige at any cost. In common with other traits it was his inheritance, and Desika could no more cast it from him than he could eliminate the love of bright colours, umbrellas, musical instruments, and gorgeous display that marks the lower castes as soon as they become possessed of wealth and place and power.

Although Desika had assured Dolores that his sister was happy with her amusements and occupations within the zenana, he had no evidence of the fact. If he had been further questioned as to when he had last seen her, he would have been obliged to admit that for at least five days they had not met. The men and women of a Hindu family, whether rich or poor, take their meals separately. The pleasant informal gathering round the dinner-table, the chat about the various interests and amusements of each individual, the friendly and sympathetic conversation between the sexes is absent. There is nothing against it, except that it is not the custom. The present system commends itself to the people, and they do not desire to change it. Therefore, unless the man seeks any lady-member of his family by going to the women's apartments, he is not likely to come into contact with her. Even if she happens to be the one to serve him with his food, there is no opportunity for conversation, as, immediately the dishes are

placed before the diners, the servers retire, and the meal is eaten in silence. Veerama with her loss of caste was not permitted to touch any of the food except that which was set aside for her own consumption. It was quite in the natural order of her life that she should not have been seen by her brother.

As he drove home in his solitary state, it struck Desika that perhaps it would be as well to inquire if all was well with his sister. She was the darling of her father's heart, and it would go hard with him if he permitted his prejudiced old mother to resort to violence in her attempt to coerce her unwilling daughter.

When he reached his house, a large block of buildings three times the size of the substantial bungalow occupied by Rama Rajah, he went at once in search of his mother. He found her in the kitchen seated on a charpoy, from which point of vantage she was able to keep a watchful eye upon various pots seething over charcoal fires tended by several women. He beckoned to her to come to the door.

"Where is my sister? I have a message for her."

"She is in punishment. This morning she told me to my face that if I would not permit her to go to the English lady in the carriage, she would find her way there on foot like a common cooly in the road. Aiyoh! What could I do with such a wilful girl, when the mango-chutney, which you and your father love so much, was in the middle of its making? The strength of a parent's arm is better than the strength of a headstrong daughter's wit."

"What did you do?" he asked imperiously, and full of suspicion.

She did not reply, but continued to enumerate her grievances, interlarding them with a string of proverbs and wise sayings. He was not to be put off however.

"I must see my sister at once. Take me to her."

Very unwillingly and not without some trepidation his mother led the way to an inner room which was little more than a cupboard. It had no ventilation, and was hot and close. She pointed to a sack in the corner.

"There is your sister. Perhaps after spending two hours tied up in that, the girl will have some sense. That was how my mother treated me when I was a child and wanted to play with my dolls, instead of being married to your father. I was but eleven years old. But she is old enough to have more sense than a little girl with dolls."

She cast a defiant glance at him as his brow contracted in a sudden gust of anger.

"You are a foolish woman, mother, to behave in this way!" he exclaimed, as he strode towards the sack and wrenched open the knots that bound the mouth of it.

"You forbade me to use the stick or to touch her with fire —both of which she will feel as soon as we hand her over to her husband's mother and wife. What could I do but use the sack which leaves no mark?" answered the Hindu lady, querulously.

Desika pulled the mouth of the sack open and assisted Veerama to free herself from her close and undignified confinement. Her limbs were cramped, and she was exhausted with weeping. A piteous little moan smote the heart of her brother, although it had little or no effect upon her mother.

"This is not to happen again," he said sternly, as he supported Veerama, who was too stiff to stand alone.

"You, yourself, told me to keep her a close prisoner to the house, and prevent her from going to the English lady. How else could I have acted, when she threatened to walk there in spite of all our words to the contrary? The making of the chutney had to be attended to. Even now those foolish women in the kitchen may be overboiling the vinegar. Aiyo! this madness of your father's in sending his daughter to a foreign land to have her head filled with strange fancies, has brought nothing but trouble upon us. Sooner would I have seen her married at eight years of age to an old man than have all this worry."

She hurried away, and Desika fetched a bowl of water for Veerama, who, amongst other ills, was suffering from thirst. After she had drunk the tears began to fall from her tired,

bloodshot eyes, and she reproached her brother for having encouraged her mother to commit such an outrage.

"It has done you no harm, little sister; it is one of the old-fashioned means for compelling obedience where the stick cannot be used. My mother acted without my knowledge, and I promise you that it shall not occur again."

He described his visit to Dolores, and repeated the messages more than once which she had sent. They soothed Veerama's wounded spirit, but they brought no real comfort to her aching heart. She would willingly have exchanged them all for one word of Rama Rajah. After that memorable interview, which was burned into her memory with dazzling vividness, she hungered for news of him, and longed for a sight of the passionate eyes that had looked into hers, for the sound of the voice that had uttered her name in an accent that no man had ever used to her before. Perhaps Desika guessed part of her secret as his eyes rested thoughtfully upon her face.

In the East passion and emotion are not controlled and regulated as in the West. When once desire is kindled the mind is set to obtain its fulfilment. There is no religious teaching that marks out the line of right and wrong in the matter; and if laws are broken, they are only the laws of men. Retribution and punishment may ensue; but there is no moral obligation to a superior Spiritual Being to refrain, on the ground that the thing desired is contrary to His decrees. The women of any country, whether East or West, who are not restrained by a strong religious instinct, are as little to be trusted as men without a sense of honour.

Although not a Christian, Veerama had imbibed certain Christian principles from Dolores, which created within her a moral sense that was unknown to her less enlightened Hindu sisters. But this fact was not realized by her brother, who instinctively and unjustly distrusted her. It was not for her sake that he was anxious to secure her propriety of action, but to prevent her from bringing disgrace upon her family, and the blush of shame to his own brow. It was bad enough

to see her remaining as she had arrived from England, without the performance of the expiatory ceremonies ; but it would be intolerable for a man in his public position if any further steps were taken in the wrong direction.

When presently she pleaded to be permitted to go and see Dolores he was firm in his refusal. He gave no reason, and the name of Rama Rajah was not mentioned between them ; he demanded a promise that she would make no attempt to leave the house until her father returned. Unless she would give that promise, he would be compelled to allow his mother to employ her own methods of coercion to ensure obedience.

Poor Veerama, stiff and sore and half-suffocated by her cruel confinement in the sack, was too much broken in spirit to do otherwise than assent. He recommended her to submit, like other Hindu girls, to her mother, and to seek for amusement and interest in the making of chutnies and pickles and preserves, such as her mother excelled in, and in other household duties.

Presently he persuaded her to accompany him to the kitchen, where she might look on and learn much, although just now she was not qualified to touch or taste any of the condiments in preparation. It was better, he told her, not without wisdom, than dreaming over her books. Assuring his mother of her docility, he left his sister to follow the avocation of thousands of Indian ladies of means and of caste. She was greeted with a grunt of satisfaction, and a sharp warning that she was not to touch a pot or a spoon. Room was made for her among the cushions upon the charpoy, and peace, though not altogether with happiness, was established.

As Desika left he said to himself that his sister must be married as soon as possible. She had been without a husband too long, and each month that passed made it more difficult for her to reconcile herself to entering a new home. He determined to speak to his father, and urge him to use his moral influence in bringing about the proposed marriage. He had already written to him, giving an account of the suitor's circumstances. But Sobraon had made no comment upon

the news beyond acknowledging the receipt of it ; and Desika's mind more than once misgave him that his father, with his advanced social opinions, would take the part of his daughter ; that he would refuse to allow any pressure to be brought in the accomplishment of a matter of such vital importance to Veerama on one hand, and to the prestige of the family on the other.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ARRIVAL OF THE GURU

SOBRAON returned from his mission of rectifying the mistakes of a hot-headed son. He deputed an older and less impetuous member of the family to go down to Dindigul and watch over his interests. Desika did not take his supersession to heart. He laughed lightly, and commended his father for not attempting to force him into uncongenial work, with the observation that not even a guru could change a man's temperament. His mission was to teach his equals politics, and not his inferiors new methods of cultivation. His father smiled indulgently, and replied to the effect that no purse was ever filled by mere talking, and that after his marriage, he must devote himself to some branch or other of the business. An agency for the sale of the cigars might perhaps be more suitable, since it would require little more than the exercise of the tongue and the pen. Desika saw no sarcasm in the proposal ; he accepted it readily, promising to throw himself into it as soon as his wedding was over.

They discussed the arrangements—it was to be a grand affair lasting several days, during which some of Sobraon's wealth would be scattered—and then Desika brought up the subject of his sister's marriage. At the mention of it, Sobraon became grave. He was confronted with a problem difficult to solve. Her marriage, he admitted to himself and tacitly to his son by his silence, was an absolute necessity at some time or other. Hitherto he had regarded that time as indefinite ; but the hour was approaching when there must be

an end of indefiniteness, and some action—he shrank from formulating it—must be taken towards attaining the end. Desika urged the acceptance of the suitor who had offered himself, but the tobacco merchant surprised his son by refusing, with some warmth, to entertain Kurrappa's proposal.

"If we reject him where are we to look for a husband for my sister?" cried Desika, concerned about the future and the honour of the family.

Sobraon did not reply, and the young man continued with increasing animation to enlarge upon the necessity of marrying her before long. He mentioned Rama Rajah's name, and spoke of the meetings that took place at the Collector's house, pointing out forcibly that no good could come of them. Rama Rajah, a Vellalan, would never propose an honourable alliance with a Shanar. Or if he did so it would be at the cost of alienation on one side or the other. It was not to be expected that he would allow himself to be outcasted. His family would demand the separation of Veerama from her own family; the performance of expensive religious ceremonies; a large dower to compensate for the condescension, and at the end of it all there would always be the chance, in any zenana quarrel, of her birth being thrown in her teeth. All this and a great deal more did Desika point out to his silent father, concluding with the observation that the Assistant Collector had not asked for her hand, and that he already had a wife. In his opinion, knowing the pride, Desika called it arrogance, of the Vellala family, it was not likely that the request would be made. He therefore counselled his father to put an end to Veerama's liberty, and to keep her within the walls of the zenana, except when she went out with her mother or some other guardian, which counsel Sobraon also received in silence.

How much it was taken to heart Desika was able to judge later in the day when his father ordered the brougham which he had put at the service of his daughter on her arrival from England, and invited Veerama to drive with him. It was a departure from the orthodox custom, a social innovation

that found no favour in his son's eyes. It was not until after they had left home that Sobraon give directions to the coachman to take them to the house of the Collector.

The peons in the verandah recognized the rich merchant as he drove up, and they offered him their homage with low salaams. Wealth in Asia, as in Europe, commands respect where it would not otherwise be bestowed, and smoothes the way which would be rough to the poor.

A little party had gathered in the drawing-room, and Mrs. Newent was dispensing tea. On hearing of Sobraon's arrival, Newent himself came forward to greet his visitors. He was surprised and pleased to see them, and his face showed what he felt. Shaking hands with them both, he asked if they would come into the drawing-room.

"I have Captain Ravellion here for a few days on his way through to the South, and Rama Rajah has looked in, as usual, to see Miss Avondean."

He glanced at Sobraon to learn if the introductions would be acceptable to him and his daughter.

"I shall be pleased to meet any of your friends, sir," the tobacco merchant said with simple courtesy.

The introductions were made, Sobraon being treated as though he were a European gentleman of the same standing. Veerama, after shaking hands with Mrs. Newent, hurried to the side of Dolores in a sudden fit of happy shyness. Rama Rajah and Ravellion were close at hand, and the Englishman was introduced. Ravellion's quick eye dwelt approvingly upon the graceful native girl, who apparently knew how to behave and was accustomed to English society. Dolores expressed her great pleasure at meeting Veerama again, and when she learned that the stranger, who had entered with her, was none other than her father, she rose to her feet and begged Rama Rajah to lead her to him.

Sobraon was standing by Mrs. Newent, who was pouring out tea. He felt strange, but not unhappy, as he glanced round with some curiosity at the family circle of the Englishman. Whilst he listened politely to what his hostess was

saying, his eye travelled everywhere and rested with keen interest upon the blind lady who was approaching on the arm of Rama Rajah.

"I have been wishing for some time past to meet you," said Dolores, as she held Sobraon's hand in the usual manner.

"And I have desired to see you, Miss Avondean, but my business has not permitted it," responded Sobraon.

The tone of his voice pleased Dolores. Although the accent was strong he did not speak in the high-pitched strident note that was peculiar to Desika. It encouraged her to say—

"I am so glad that you have brought Veerama back. She has grown very dear to me, and I have missed her much during the few days of her absence."

As they dropped into conversation Newent addressed Rama Rajah and occupied his attention, whilst Mrs. Newent busied herself preparing a cup of tea for Veerama, which Miss Beauchamp handed.

The move made by Dolores left Ravellion with Veerama, and upon him devolved the task of making conversation. He threw himself into it with zest, and when Miss Beauchamp approached with the tea he hastened to hand the cake and show "the fascinating little Hindu girl," as he mentally termed her, all the attentions so lightly paid by Englishmen and so devoid of meaning otherwise than as courtesies. She had received similar attentions in England, and Dolores had taught her how to accept them with dignity.

Sobraon looked on with surprise and satisfaction. The ordinary Hindu lady without the experience of Veerama would have been overwhelmed with self-consciousness, and whilst endeavouring to appear at her ease would probably have erred against the rules that govern English society as well as those that govern her own. When she had finished drinking her tea, Ravellion relieved her of her cup and continued the inconsequent conversation which amused them both.

Rama Rajah, listening and replying to his chief, also had opportunity to glance round. He noted the eager talk between

Dolores and Sobraon, and guessed that the subject of it was Veerama's marriage. Then his eye wandered to Ravellion and his companion. He saw Veerama smile now and then as she listened. He could not gather what was said, but from the action of the Englishman, he judged that he was relating an amusing story. At its conclusion Veerama's low, gentle laugh caught his ear. It irritated him and created an unreasoning sense of impatience. Why did she listen to the man's familiar words? She was a Hindu lady, and she ought to remember the fact. She ought to treat all members of the opposite sex, no matter what their nationality might be, with a dignified reserve which would warn them to keep their distance. It was immodest on her part. Hindu ladies were not supposed to laugh aloud; for, though it was done in England, it was considered bold and ill-mannered in Hindu society.

Ravellion took up a photograph book from a table close at hand, and held it whilst Veerama turned over the pages until she found a certain picture. It was a group done at Maidenhead, and in it was Veerama herself, wearing a long winter coat trimmed with sable. Their heads were bent towards the picture as she pointed out the people in the group. Ravellion commented upon them, and once more elicited a laugh. Antipathy and dislike coursed through the mind of the Assistant Collector as he looked at the English officer. In his uneasiness he became restless, and his attention wandered from the subject upon which Newent was speaking.

"You want to be off, I have no doubt," remarked Newent, misunderstanding the cause of his companion's uneasiness. "I am glad that you have applied for leave. Have you made any plans besides those we spoke of?"

"I think of going on a pilgrimage with my wife, who is anxious to visit a temple in the South after we have been to Tinnevelly."

"Rama Rajah wishes to say good-bye," observed Newent to his wife.

She shook hands with him and uttered a few words. As he listened and made reply, his glance once more wandered

round the room. Dolores was still deep in conversation with Sobraon, while Veerama appeared to have no eyes nor ears for any one but Ravellion. How could Rama Rajah guess that the girl was acutely conscious of his own presence? Not daring, however, to trust herself under the observation of her father, she took refuge in an apparent absorption in her companion. Rama Rajah was equally ignorant of the fact that Sobraon Rao was watching for any sign that would corroborate the truth of Desika's suggestion that there was an attachment between them. So far the tobacco merchant had seen no sign, and he was inclined to believe that his son was mistaken.

As Rama Rajah turned to leave the room, Veerama shot a swift glance in his direction, but he failed to catch it. Newent accompanied him to the verandah, where they stood talking while the peon summoned the brougham. Through the open doors he could see the occupants of the drawing-room, whose positions were unchanged.

He stepped into his carriage and bade the coachman take him home. His mind was in a turmoil, and there was a glow of dull anger in his heart. This was the effect of Western education upon Eastern women, he thought angrily; they did not know how to use the liberty given to them.

Presently his better self asserted itself. After his long residence in England he could not fail to understand how innocent and harmless was the chat of the drawing-room. He was unjust in accusing Veerama of flippancy and immodesty. English ladies laughed when gentlemen said amusing things. No one knew better than Rama Rajah himself that in a house like Newent's nothing would be uttered or even hinted at, that was immodest or in bad taste; yet he was raging within himself because Veerama talked and laughed with an Englishman, as she had talked with himself almost every day previous to the sudden suspension of her visits to Dolores.

It was the inherited instinct, only half civilized, that pierced the cloak of education and prompted him to attack his rival

who was finding favour in the eyes of the woman he admired. The instinct is not unknown to the European ; but with him it is a mere shadow of the storm that shakes the Oriental, who finds nothing short of the zenana and the harem will satisfy his jealous nature. It is not that he distrusts the discretion of the woman alone. He fears the man. Against his better judgment and in the face of his European experience, Rama Rajah distrusted the good-looking British officer who leaned towards the girl, and whose eyes rested with approval upon her form as a thing of beauty, and whose voice was toned to please and attract.

Yet Ravellion was guiltless of love-making. He had no desire to awaken any other sentiment in Veerama's breast than a passing interest. He was merely amusing himself and his companion for the moment ; and Rama Rajah knew this to be the case, but he found it difficult to convince himself of the truth of it.

It is natural to every Oriental to distrust his fellow-man wherever woman is concerned. In his heart of hearts he is aware that the man of the East with his more sensuous nature cannot look upon the opposite sex with the same purity of mind and restraint of thought as is exercised by the man of the West. School himself as he will the Oriental never forgets sex ; and under the circumstances the more thoughtful reformers are opposed to the lifting of the purdah with too violent a hand. The light suddenly admitted may not only dazzle the inmates of the zenanas, and blind them in the choice of their paths in life, but it may upset the balance of the male mind, and cause men to fight again under the influence of that strong animal instinct which prompts them to guard their own by brute strength.

Rama Rajah was sharply alive to the fact that in this matter his education and his natural instincts clashed. The conviction that his instincts were correct from the Hindu point of view did not tend to lessen his mental disturbance. There was surely something wrong in Western education ; it was too advanced for the nation. And yet—and yet—Veerama with that very

training was the ideal wife he would have chosen for himself if he had had the opportunity.

But if he were united to a woman of her education, would he be content to allow her the liberty that Veerama was exercising at that very moment; or would his inherited instincts be too strong for him and impel him to demand her seclusion in the zenana?

The reply was unsatisfactory. As a husband and a Hindu he could not have seen with equanimity a Hindu friend conversing familiarly with his own wife after the manner of Ravellion. The thought of such a thing was intolerable. With a strong effort he put the subject aside. A marriage with Veerama was impossible for other reasons. If there had been at any time a flash of hope that he might one day conquer prejudice and win her honourably, this revelation of himself just made nipped it in the bud. His life was cast in certain lines, and it was useless to attempt to rule it otherwise. He must be content with Lukshmi, capricious and wilful though she was, and he would not allow himself to dream again of congenial companionship. He determined that for the future he would time his visits to Dolores so that there were no meetings with Veerama.

The pleasant stir and excitement when an honoured guest has announced his advent is known to most households all over the world. Its effect had been experienced in the domestic circle of the Assistant Collector. The stormy atmosphere in which the family had been living cleared with tropical abruptness; and, if anxiety remained at all outside Rama Rajah's office, it took another form, an anxiety to give the expected guru a suitable welcome.

The guru is the religious instructor, the father confessor of the family. He comes to be consulted on matters of business as well as religion, pointing out the lucky days when a journey may be undertaken, a building or piece of work commenced, a bride or bridegroom sought, a pilgrimage planned. He sees that domestic ceremonies, connected with the various periods of a boy's life are duly performed, and he orders punishment

for the offenders against caste, and arranges for its restitution. His word is law, and against it there is no appeal. He is therefore a person of consideration to be propitiated.

The restitution of Rama Rajah's caste had been effected under the direction of the old guru. The man who was coming now was paying his first visit ; hence the unusual anxiety to do all that was possible in honour of the expected guest.

Camphor-wood chests were ransacked for their treasures of silk and fine linen. Jewels were brightened, and brass and silver vessels polished. The house was swept and sprinkled throughout. Rugs and purdahs were shaken, and some soft pillows of silk-cotton were covered with oriental satin, and set apart for the sole use of his reverence.

A room in the vicinity of the kitchen and the women's quarters, was prepared with the usual sprinkling of a certain liquid held in more repute by the Hindu than the European ; and the floor was adorned with intricate patterns done in white chalk. A new grass mat, and the freshly covered pillows were arranged upon a charpoy, and new silver drinking vessels placed ready at hand.

A supply of the finest rice, together with sweetmeats, pickles, chutneys, areca and pistachio nuts, attar of rose and sandal-wood powder with camphor, sugar and butter required for pujah, were purchased. Those who grew the finest vegetables and flowers were directed to bring their produce for the use of the swami, and on their heads be the blame if they failed to satisfy him.

In anticipation of the great event Lukshmi forgot for the moment her past troubles. Her escapade had been more serious in its consequences than she had foreseen. Instead of looking upon it as a pretty piece of wilful frolic, her mother-in-law had regarded it as another instance of presumption on the part of her son's wife, and she had resented it in a manner that had caused Lukshmi to smart in spirit as well as in the flesh. But the storm had blown over, and no one could think of anything but the coming of his holiness.

On his return to the house, Rama Rajah found it in an

uproar. A message had been received to say that the guru was approaching. He was but a short distance away; and every member of the family who could escape from the labour of the moment had gone forth to meet him.

Rama Rajah's wife and mother were in the verandah as he mounted the steps. Both ladies had veiled themselves in the folds of their sarees; and he did not fail to note that Lukshmi in addition to wearing one of her richest and smartest cloths, had powdered her face with saffron, and adorned her plump young figure with the flowers and jewels a bride might have put on when awaiting her eager groom. The frown upon his brow deepened as he caught the flash of an excited and defiant eye between the folds of the veiling silk.

"Why do you go out of the house to meet him?" he asked irritably. "It will be sufficient to cross the threshold when he arrives."

His mother glanced at him in surprise. "My son, we would honour the swami and meet him on the road as has been the custom."

"If you must go, then I will come with you myself," he replied.

"Do so, my son. His sacred excellency will be pleased with your attention," said the elder lady.

But Lukshmi was not so well satisfied with the arrangement. "Why trouble my husband? It will be sufficient if we go by ourselves, mother."

"Peace, girl! your voice is like the voice of the copper-smith bird; it sounds on all occasions."

They walked slowly down the carriage drive. The compound and garden were not kept as neatly as the grounds round the houses of the Europeans; and where an Englishman would have had flowers and foliage plants there were fruit bushes and vegetables. They turned away from the town and strolled along the broad avenue road, where the cultivated land stretched away on either side without hedge or boundary line except for the little bund that held up the water when the fields were irrigated.

Far in the distance floated a column of red dust that glowed in the warm light of the setting sun. It was raised by the tramp of the bearers' feet as they carried the palanquin of the guru. He was preceded by a man beating a tomtom, and by the bearer of an open umbrella, the ensign of nobility and state. The naked feet of the palanquin bearers shuffled slowly through the soft dust as they wended their way under the old trees, now in shade, now in broad patches of brilliant light that made each white garment a dazzling spot upon the green landscape.

Rama Rajah's eyes rested on the approaching procession with a curious mixture of emotions. The scene carried him back to the days of his childhood when he accepted the guru with the awed faith of a Hindu child, and regarded him with superstitious reverence. Out of the brilliant sunshine and great wide landscape the mysterious figure came, whence he knew not. Throughout the family, from his great-grandmother, whom he just remembered, down to himself, the smallest child in the zenana, an overwhelming desire to propitiate the visitor filled each mind. The guru occupied a room assigned to his use, and at the bidding of his disciple different members were summoned into it, one at a time, and were closeted perhaps for hours. These were chiefly the ladies, and he used to wonder what mysterious rites took place behind that closed door. Had the guru laid blessings upon them or curses?

At the end of the visit the holy one departed in his palanquin with drums and umbrella, disappearing down the sunny road he knew not whither. The sound of the tomtom came faintly back on the morning breeze, some time after the last gleam of white muslin had vanished, dying away slowly in the distance. Where was the great man going? no one could say. Had he a house to live in? His grandmother lifted a warning finger and bade him be silent. The guru, she said, could hear all that was spoken, even though he was no longer with them. Inquisitive questions angered the holy man, and brought down a curse upon the head of the inquirer.

With a faint shadow of the old awe and wonder rising within

him he watched the approaching procession. Then his Western teaching asserted its strength to combat the hereditary instincts. He possessed more knowledge now of the ways of the guru, of his assumption and of his blasphemous claim to divine rectitude in all his human deeds, and his spirit rose in revolt. Two or three times he was minded to turn back in disgust, leaving the ladies to welcome their guest as they thought fit. But something in the manner of his wife determined him to stay.

They met the procession about a hundred yards from the gateway of the compound. Those of the household who had already joined, had fallen behind or were walking alongside the palanquin. The guru reclined upon cushions of scarlet silk. Curtains of the same material hung from a gilt rod and were partly drawn. The pole as well as the palanquin itself was richly lacquered and gilded. The bearers, naked except for their muslin loin-cloths, had their heads shaven, and upon forehead and chest were smeared sacred ashes. They took no notice of the gathering crowd but continued their shuffling tread—neither a walk nor a trot—to the strains of a monotonous chant, in which the sacred attributes of the guru were set forth in endless verse.

At a signal from the disciple they stopped, and the guru extended a hand to draw aside the curtain, so that he might see those who had advanced to meet him. Rama Rajah's mother prostrated herself with pious ejaculations, and her example was followed by Lukshmi, but not before she had returned the heavy gaze of the guru with a temerity that indicated her confidence in obtaining the favour of the swami.

"Kneel, my son, as we have done and greet his holiness. His curse or even his mere displeasure is to be avoided at all costs," whispered his mother, as she regained her feet and shook the dust of the road from her clothes.

Rama Rajah had no intention of giving the guru anything more than the respectful greeting that should pass between man and man. He placed his hands together and bowed his head in salutation. The guru did not speak but there was a flash in the eye indicating the fact that the restraint

on the part of the Assistant Collector in his greeting was received with resentment. It was only momentary, and the large heavily lidded eyes, their pupils dilated with asceticism or drugs, again rested on the form of the Assistant Collector's wife who had taken up a position by the palanquin.

The tomtom resumed its interrupted drumming and the bearers their ambling shuffle. In another five minutes the palanquin arrived at the entrance of the house. It was placed upon the ground under the portico and the guru rose from his silken cushions.

He was of middle age ; his figure spare and sinewy, and above the ordinary height. It gave him a look of strength and vigorous manhood. His body was bare to the waist. Across his broad chest hung the sacred thread and a string of Brahmin beads adorned his neck. With dreamy gaze he glanced round on the little circle that had gathered to give him welcome, and bestowed the highly prized gift—a pinch of sacred ashes—which was received with reverence by all. It was sufficient to make each individual happy, and to convey the impression that a blessing had descended with the words uttered, and that good luck was secured for a season. Rama Rajah's hand alone was not outstretched, and though the blessing pronounced may have been intended to include him with the rest of the household, he instinctively felt that he had placed himself outside the favoured circle. He was conscious of an antipathy he could not subdue towards this arrogant human being, who accepted the religious adoration paid him as a divine right ; and he resented his assumption of the power to bless and curse whom he would.

Once again Western education and enlightenment rose up in indignant opposition to the superstition of the East.

CHAPTER XV

THE GURU'S DEMAND

As the guru disappeared Rama Rajah retired to his own room, Jaganath following close at his heels. The latter drew up the blinds of the verandah.

"Did you, too, go out to meet the swami on his arrival?" inquired the Assistant Collector, as he stood looking into the garden that was clothed with the splendour of the sunset lights.

"I made my salaams with the rest when his holiness entered the house."

"Do you also fear him?" he asked, turning a contemplative look upon his cousin.

Jaganath met his gaze with some uneasiness. It was not wise to speak of the great ones lightly, especially after sundown. Even now the orb of day touched the purple hills in the west, and the supernatural awoke to the liberty of the night. A flood of orange and crimson spread across the sky, arching the zenith with broad bands of colour that touched the eastern horizon where a pale planet floated in its rising.

"It is foolish to trifle with powers that we cannot fathom," was his reply.

"You believe that he can inflict curses where he pleases."

Rama Rajah put the question sharply as an assertion, and his companion answered reluctantly, lowering his voice to a whisper as he leaned over the chair into which the other had thrown himself.

"We have no proof that he cannot do so."

Jaganath brought out a little smoker's table and placed

it near his cousin's chair, opening the box of cigars by way of invitation. Rama Rajah picked one out with deliberation, and the attentive Jaganath supplied him with a piece of live charcoal. While he cut the end and drew the fire to the tobacco leaf, Rama Rajah's mind was occupied with other matters than the blue smoke that escaped his lips. He had seen gurus, and he knew something of their ways, though he might not know their habitations. As the purple shadows of night crept over the landscape he looked the possibilities—from what he had seen he knew them to be probabilities—of the immediate future calmly in the face and prepared himself to meet events with the manly courage his old tutor had fostered.

The early hours of the night in the plains are not marked by the hush of retirement and somnolence. The birds and butterflies that have made the garden gay retire, and the flowers that opened to the warm kiss of the sun close their petals. But as the songster and fluttering insect of the daylight sink into quiet sleep, others awake and come forth. The large moon-flowers spread their blossoms to the strong-winged hawk-moths, and the night-birds, with strange calls, leave their leafy shelter.

Rama Rajah's eyes followed the heavy flight of the flying foxes against the evening sky. During the hot hours they had hung from the branches of an old banyan tree, shrill and quarrelsome even in their repose, each one endeavouring to secure its chosen bough for its exclusive use. As the reddening sun touched the horizon they awoke, and unwrapping themselves from their mantles of leathern wing, they rose one by one into the air and circled over their roosting place until the last sluggard had unhooked himself from his branch and joined the company. With the approach of night they winged their way to where the fruit hung thick and ripe upon the wild fig-trees, occasionally uttering a cawing croak like a hoarse crow.

The day's labour was done, and from the town came the faint hum of many voices as the work-people issued from cigar-factory and cotton-press. They laughed and chattered gaily as though their work had been play. The fields were deserted

by the husbandmen and their cattle ; and the jackal roamed where he would, filling the night-air with his howls. In the warm, dusty streets the bazaar-men lighted flaring lamps upon their stalls, and women stirred savoury pots of curry in the privacy of their inner verandahs, sending forth an appetizing odour of ghee and garlic. The time for recreation and amusement had arrived—for eating, drinking, smoking, and gossiping until sleep overtook each individual in his own time and brought silence upon the scene. No toilet was necessary, no stumbling upstairs with bedroom light, no creeping between sheets and blankets. He had but to loosen the cloth that during the day draped the brown limbs, to arrange the small pillow upon the mat, and to unfold the single sheet that was to serve as coverlet and mosquito-net in one, and the process of “going to bed” was completed. The women sought the privacy of their own quarters, but the men laid themselves down where they pleased, in the verandahs or in one of the rooms. The drivers of bullock-carts were content to seek the shade of the old avenue trees in company with their cattle, and to rest by the ashes of the camp-fire that cooked the evening meal.

The light faded out of the sky, and the flying foxes departed. Still Rama Rajah sat brooding in the darkening verandah, while Jaganath busied himself with lighting lamps in the house and making preparations for the supper—it was of too simple a nature to be called dinner. The thoughts of the Assistant Collector were not fixed upon Veerama and the Englishman. The sight of the good-looking guru, and now the sound of the tomtom being beaten outside the door of his room, chased away the disturbing memory of the afternoon, and presented another problem to his mind.

A second cigar, half smoked, went out as he pondered upon the coming night. A dull resentment burned like a live coal in his rebellious heart, prompting resistance to the conservatism of his nation, resistance to the demands of his religion, resistance to the traditions and customs of generations of forefathers. His residence in England had taught him that men have

sacred rights which only corrupt teachers dare to violate in the name of religion. He might not believe fully in the God of the Christians, but he had learned through Dolores and her gentle father that the Deity to be a Deity must possess certain attributes, must be a God of goodness and not of evil. Apart from rituals the Great All-Father must be endowed with those qualities which command respect and are worthy of adoration. Justice, beneficence, benign pity that moves to succour, were attributes which Western theology ascribed to the Deity. The Almighty rose far above the taint of human passions. Yet the guru was wont to claim for his god indulgence through his own personal sensations in some of the worst of man's emotions.

This guru, who had been received as a divinity by the family, was the successor to the old man remembered by Rama Rajah in his childhood. Once, soon after he returned from England, the old guru had visited the family. But he was very infirm and the vigour of manhood was gone. Though he promised to fulfil every request made by the family and assured each one of the favour of the gods, their hearts misgave them that he was too old and too somnolent to be heard by the higher powers. Good luck his presence might bring, but that the gods would be moved to grant a son to the daughter-in-law of the house they doubted, and time proved that they had reason for their doubts. The new guru satisfied every expectation. His whole appearance breathed power and strength. Whom he blessed would be blessed; whom he cursed would assuredly wither and die. The credulous women seemed to see the divine afflatus, which he claimed to possess, in his drug-stimulated eye. The man believed that when his sensations reached heights that were transcendent, it was the god himself who experienced the emotion through his chosen human instrument. With this blind faith in himself as the interpreter of the divine will, the guru issued commands that it were blasphemy in the general opinion to disobey.

Jaganath brought the supper hot and steaming from the kitchen. It was extra good, the condiments having been

dealt out with a liberal hand in honour of the guest. He looked wistfully in the direction of the verandah, where his cousin sat as he placed the savoury dishes on the table. He waited for a few minutes, but finding that Rama Rajah did not move he approached his chair and said—

“The food waits, brother.”

The Assistant Collector rose as though in a dream, and entered the lighted room. The brilliant lamp dazzled him, and he covered his eyes with his hands. When he removed them the expression of his face had changed. The eyes no longer shrank from the light but gazed round the room with the stern eager look of a man who has faced a crisis and come to an irrevocable decision. He turned to Jaganath, and his eyes shone with an unspoken query. A leaping flash of intelligence was the answer.

“Little brother, I have few friends. Perhaps I am about to lose those I have. Will you remain true?”

Jaganath seized his hand as he replied, in a voice that trembled with sympathetic emotion—

“If they all forsake you I will remain true. What is it that you will do?”

But even as he asked the question the answer came in the look that met his. Jaganath dropped upon his knees before the erect figure and touched with his forehead the instep of Rama Rajah’s foot, an act indicating complete submission.

“Brother, may I speak one word? Do not bring the curse of the swami upon you, I pray!”

“Are you afraid?”

The other had imbibed no Western notions of religious freedom. He believed implicitly in his heathen deities and their emissaries.

“I am not afraid for myself. I am ready to share every ill under the sun with my brother. But it is not good to anger the gods.”

There was silence, and Jaganath regained his feet. He placed himself behind the vacant chair at the table and looked at the tempting dishes upon the table.

"The food grows cold," he said, with entreaty in his voice.

Rama Rajah seated himself, but his thoughts were far from the evening meal.

"Will you stay with me to-night if I need you?" he asked.
"I will stay."

"Even though the swami curse me?"

"Even though he curse the whole house."

Rama Rajah helped himself and the dinner was eaten in silence. When it was finished Jaganath cleared the table and retired to the little pantry-room at the end of the verandah. There he took his own supper from what was left, and when he had finished he returned to the sitting-room. He found his cousin seated at his writing-table engaged in looking through some office documents.

"Shall I close the doors for the night?" he inquired.

There was an exchange of glances as Rama Rajah signified his consent. The great wooden doors of the bedroom were not shut every night, the screens being sufficient to ensure privacy. But on this occasion Jaganath carefully shut them, opening the venetians to admit the air. The iron bolts were shot above and below. Nothing short of a battering-ram could have burst their fastenings asunder. The same was done with all the doors of the sitting-room excepting that which opened into the reception-room. This was screened with what are known as half-doors, and it was the entrance by which the members of the family sought the Assistant Collector when they wished to speak with him. At his cousin's direction it was left unbarred.

A little later the voice of the big mistress sounded on the other side of the screen doors. Rama Rajah rose at once and releasing the catch flung them open. His mother wore a rich silk cloth, and upon her forehead was the fresh mark of the religious sect to which she belonged.

"My son, I would have a word with you."

"What is it, mother?"

She cast a shrewd glance at him with eyes in which shone

unusual excitement, and her voice betokened anxiety as she replied—

“It is about the swami.”

“Speak on,” he said with a coldness that sent a vague terror through her heart.

“You have not yet been summoned to the chamber of the swami?”

“Not yet,” he answered more shortly than before.

She glanced at him again, this time with increasing disapproval.

“Your greeting was cold, my son, when his holiness arrived. Is it well to give offence to the great ones?”

“My father did all that was necessary, he being the head of the house. Has the guru complained?”

“On the contrary, his disciple assures us that he was pleased with his reception and with the gifts we have presented. He accepts a few rupees for his follower but nothing for himself. The rest of the gifts are to be sent to the temple to-morrow. All he requires of us is the entertainment which the house has to offer. Nothing that contributes to his happiness whilst under our roof must be withheld.”

Her eager eyes sought his with a look of inquiry bordering on anxiety. He made no comment and she continued—

“We are doing all we can to propitiate the holy one, and if our prayer is granted we shall be thankful. It is hard upon a woman of my age to have to live in a house which does not echo to the tongues of grandchildren. Your father and I have both made our prayers with the swami, and have asked his advice on several matters. Other members of the family are offering their requests. Lastly, will come yourself and your wife. With her the swami will speak alone.”

There was an eloquent pause, during which the son steadily regarded his mother with increasing sternness.

“It is not necessary; she can retire when I do,” he answered at last, and his words were short and abrupt.

“Not so, my son. That is not our custom; and the holy one has decreed otherwise. She is restless and unhappy

without a child, and her empty heart is full of mischief. She brings disgrace upon us by her tricks. With motherhood she will grow sweet and gentle again."

She searched his face wistfully, remembering how difficult of management he was when his will and hers clashed. There was nothing of his father's easy nature in him; he took rather after herself, and it was a case of Greek meeting Greek.

"It is not necessary that my wife should remain in the presence of the guru without me, her husband," he said, with a firmness that chilled her blood.

"But I say that it is," she retorted angrily, as her fear increased. "In all matters we will conform to the wishes of the swami on this his first visit. Then he will grant our desires. When we bring home the new wife for you, my son," she continued, in a softer tone that savoured of persuasiveness, "it will put an end to all jealousy and evil thought if Lukshmi has the certain promise of motherhood."

"I do not desire another wife."

"That we will discuss later. For the present we can think only of the swami and how best we may please him, being sure that any sacrifice that is made will be acceptable to the gods and will bring its reward. It is now nine o'clock. In an hour's time the swami will be ready, and after his interview with your wife he will rest undisturbed."

Rama Rajah heard his mother in silence. His face was shadowed by the hand upon which he leaned. So still was he that he might have been asleep; but the burning eyes that gleamed at her from the shadow showed that slumber was far away from that busy brain. The beat of the tomtom fell on their ears.

"Ah, my sister has come from the guru's chamber, and now her son desires to make a request concerning his own marriage. I must return," cried his mother. "In an hour's time your wife will be ready."

"Let her come here and tell me when the swami awaits her."

Something in his tone caused her to stop in her hasty retreat, and turn to look at him once more.

"You will go, my son?" she cried anxiously.

He smiled oddly as he replied, "Assuredly, I will go if my wife goes."

The old lady's brow cleared as she answered, "She will go with pleasure; she is longing to cast herself before the feet of the swami."

Again the beat of the tomtom sounded. She heard its call, but resisted her inclination to fly to do its bidding in her desire to satisfy herself of the compliance of her son. A messenger approached.

"The disciple says that the swami has need of more camphor for the pujah."

It was sufficient. She forgot all else except that his holiness required something which she could give. She hurried away eager to minister to his wants. The storeroom, the house, herself, her whole family were at the service of the guru, a man who, for a certain period, whilst the divine afflatus rested in the ark of his body, could not sin.

Together the cousins sat, Rama Rajah on his chair as he had learned to sit in England, Jaganath upon a mat that he had placed on the other side of the office-table, where he was shaded from the light of the lamp. Only once was the silence broken when the latter rose to adjust the wick. He bent over the table and fingered the screw with deliberate criticism until he was satisfied with the height of the flame. When he had finished handling the lamp he turned to his cousin.

"Sir, is it necessary to anger the swami?"

His voice was slow and trembled with the prayer he dared not utter. Cold and distinct with adamantine firmness came the reply.

"If you fear for yourself, little brother, go now. I shall still know that you are my friend, but a friend without strength, whose liver turns to water in the face of danger."

Jaganath made no answer. A sigh of resignation escaped his lips, and he went back to his mat to efface himself until his assistance might be required.

CHAPTER XVI

THE VIGIL

PUNCTUALLY to the minute, a sound of silken draperies and silver anklets reached the ears of Rama Rajah. He rose to his feet at once, alert, his face set with a purpose, and turned towards the door expectant. Jaganath had also risen, and stood with head bent and eyes resolutely averted, as Lukshmi swung open the screen doors.

She was a vision of loveliness, and she had no thought of anything but the puja that was about to be performed. Her toilet had been re-made with even greater care than in the afternoon. Fresh blossoms adorned her hair; her dainty person was scented and powdered with sandalwood and saffron. Jewels hung from neck, ears, and wrists, but their sparkle did not equal the sparkle of the eyes that were raised to her husband's face in an unseeing gaze. The potion sent by the hand of the disciple had been dutifully swallowed. Already it was at work in the youthful blood, filling the brain with soft sensuous visions and the soul with passionate longing. Lukshmi was no longer the tricky rather spiteful girl who had dared to deceive the wife of the Collector and her blind friend, but a melting emotional woman.

"Come, come, my lord," she cried softly, "the swami calls."

"There is no need for haste," replied Rama Rajah, as he took in every detail of dress and expression.

"There is no need for haste," she repeated dreamily, advancing towards him. "Have we not the whole night wherein to make our prayers?"

"Come into my room," he said, gently leading her towards the bedroom, and closing the door that shut it off from the sitting-room.

Scarcely knowing what she was about, she followed docilely until she reached the centre of the apartment. It was dimly illuminated by a single wall-lamp. Her eyes wandered aimlessly round as though unconsciously seeking for something that was not there.

"Let us go to the swami," she said again, in a soft low voice.

The scent from her draperies and from the jasmin flowers in her hair filled his nostrils. She gazed at him with eyes that were dilated and unobservant. Her lips were parted and her hands were clasped loosely across the white silken cloth. He approached and laid a hand upon her shoulder. At his touch she started like a dreamer roused out of a pleasant sleep, and, unclasping her hands, shrank back with a sudden narrowing of the eyelids. Seating herself upon a broad couch she gripped with nervous fingers the quilted mattress on each side of her, and turned upon him with a troubled frown upon her brow.

"Do not touch me! Why do we not seek him? Is he angry? Let us go to him, and we will chase his anger away and restore him to happiness."

Rama Rajah made no reply, but drawing a chair near to the sofa upon which she was seated, he quietly dropped into it. She continued to search his face with increasing perplexity, at a complete loss to comprehend what his action meant. Once she rose to her feet and stood, as though waiting for him to do the same. But finding that he remained motionless, she sat down again with an uneasy catch of the breath. For some minutes they rested without movement, except for the nervous tightening of her fingers upon the cretonne.

The silence was broken by the sound of the tomtom. It fell upon her ears, as it had fallen upon the ears of his mother, with an imperative summons that at all costs must be obeyed. She started to her feet, and extending her arms, cried—

"He calls ! Swami, I come ! I come !"

Her eyes were awake now, and they shone in eager anticipation, with but one thought behind them, blind submission to the swami's will. The potion was at work, not intoxicating the brain as much as stimulating fanaticism and other passions beyond control. She glided swiftly to the second door of the bedroom that opened into the house, giving an exit that did not necessitate passing through the office. But it was heavily barred and resisted all her efforts to wrench it open, the upper bolts being beyond her reach. She went quickly to the sitting-room, and, crossing it, attempted to get through the door by which she had entered. Seizing the latch she swung the light screen-doors aside, but was confronted by the heavy venetians of the wooden door which, in her absence in the bedroom, had been closed and securely bolted. Baffled she sought the verandah, but here again she was met with bolts and bars beyond her reach.

During her ineffectual attempts to leave, Jaganath had remained seated upon his mat near the table, where he was screened from sight, unless any one moved round to that side of the room. But Lukshmi took no heed of him. She had forgotten his very existence, and indeed everything else but the fact that the guru was waiting for them.

Through the open venetians came the persistent drumming of the tomtom. It seemed, as she listened, as though the drumming grew more impatient each moment that passed, more imperative in its call. She ran to the door through which she and her mother-in-law had entered, and beat impotently against its unyielding panels.

The dreaminess had departed, the soft, submissive, melting mood was gone, and Rama Rajah was confronted with a woman who was just awakening to the fact that she was under restraint at a moment when she most pined for her liberty. She was entrapped and imprisoned and cut off from the fulfilment of the dominant desire of her heart to do pujah. The eyes that had hitherto gazed into his with unobservant languor suddenly became glittering points of light, reflecting back

a dangerous spark of wrath. The voice that had been low and gentle became discordant and harsh.

“What is this? Closed doors when the swami calls! Let me go! Already he has waited too long. The camphor burns! The pujah begins!”

She advanced towards him threateningly; but he faced her, as impassive and resolute in his bearing as the door that barred her way. Again she spoke, pouring forth her words in a stream of protest and entreaty.

“Let me go! He is chanting the muntras that propitiate the gods, and we are absent. Let me go! Let me go!”

She threw herself against the door in a frantic but useless attempt to burst it open.

The disciple, finding that his drumming met with no response, increased his efforts, striking his instrument with a quicker beat. It caught her ear and served to increase her agitation. Rama Rajah quietly took up a position in the room from which he could watch all her movements, making no attempt to control them. His stillness and self-possession only added fuel to the fire of her rage. She flew towards him and seized him by the wrists.

“Madman! is this how you treat the holy man? Open the door at once, before his curse descends upon us!”

In answer to her entreaty there was neither word nor movement. His equanimity maddened her. She dragged a chair to the door, mounted upon it, and tried to reach the bolt. But Rama Rajah was at her side in a moment. His strong arms were folded round her silken skirts and she was lifted down bodily. He set her upon the floor gently, like a naughty child, regardless of her struggles, and threw the chair aside. For once in her life she felt the physical strength of his arms and knew that in that respect she was no match for him.

Jaganath, silent and observant in his corner, smiled. This was the proper way to treat a rebellious wife. If his cousin would add a taste of the stick perhaps he would have less trouble in the future. But though he smiled to see Lukshmi foiled in her attempt to escape, the growing insistence of the

tomtom's call was not without its effect upon his own mind as he sat and listened. Rama Rajah was right generally in opposing his will to that of his wife, and of enforcing it by brute strength if necessary. But on this occasion his wife was not the only person interested. There was the desire of another involved, and that other was possessed of an unfathomable power, in comparison of which his wife's strength was as nothing. Jagannath was aware of all that was meant by blind submission on the part of his cousin. But in his Hindu mind, untouched by the teaching of the West with its creation of higher ideals, he decided that he would willingly have foregone all his rights, and have yielded up any wife of his to the gods if she had been required.

When Lukshmi felt herself lifted from the chair forcibly and placed upon her feet, astonishment held her dumb for a few seconds. But the silence was speedily broken as she found the use of her tongue. Her husband's intentions could no longer be misunderstood. It was quite plain that he had for his object nothing more nor less than the thwarting of the guru's will. Thoroughly alarmed at the probable consequences of his insane conduct, she cast herself upon the ground at his feet, and abandoning herself to an outburst of passionate tears, she begged abjectly to be allowed to go without further delay. If he did not wish to accompany her, his mother would willingly do so. Such behaviour could only bring down a curse instead of the blessing they both desired. The dread that had suddenly entered her soul dominated the other emotion that had been fostered by the philtre.

He listened to her prayers unmoved, and was untouched by the sight of her passionate tears. These were checked by a loud knocking on the door. The voice of one of the women was heard outside. Lukshmi lifted her head with renewed hope. Succour was coming from the zenana, and she would speedily be liberated by the authority of the mistress of the house.

“The swami waits for the young master and his wife. His holiness asks why there is delay.”

Lukshmi sprang to her feet, and, rushing to the door, she poured out her tale of woe through the venetians. With sobs and vehement denunciations of her jailer, she told the messenger that she was a prisoner. Without waiting to hear the end of the story, the woman, who had grasped the fact that the young mistress was detained against her will, hurried back to impart the awful news. Its effect was ominous. The tomtom ceased, and there was a hush of alarm and consternation over the whole house. Not a single inmate had as yet retired to rest, for none could close an eye until the last of the swami's wishes had been fulfilled. The cessation of the beat of the drum had a significance which appealed to Jaganath as well as to Lukshmi. Even Rama Rajah himself was not conscious of it without a stirring of the blood.

The swami had learned the reason for the delay.

Lukshmi, having exhausted herself with the relation of her sorrows plentifully interlarded with abuse of her husband, retired to the bedroom whither he quietly followed. In five minutes the knocking at the door was repeated, and Rama Rajah heard his mother's voice. Patiently he went at her call and listened to her entreaties, replying calmly that he had come to the determination not to seek the aid of the guru. He gave no excuse, no reason for his conduct. He simply refused to comply with her request. Lukshmi heard their voices and her husband's refusal. Like a whirlwind she returned to the door, and beating her hands against the venetians in impotent rage, she prayed her mother-in-law to obtain her release, concluding with loud lamentations in which the older lady joined.

Finding that their supplications had no effect, his mother had resort to reproaches, and asked him if he wished to bring them all to destruction. Lukshmi trembled as she listened to the string of misfortunes enumerated by her mother-in-law as certain to follow on his contumacious conduct. But it was all of no avail. His stolid silence exasperated her, and she had recourse to threats. These had no more effect than her prayers.

"I will bring all the men of the house and have the doors forced, and we will tear your wife away from her crazy husband!" she cried at the top of her voice.

"Stop, mother! waste not your breath in threats," replied her son, sternly.

He went to his office-table and took a revolver from one of the drawers. Holding it up to the venetians, he bade her look at what he had in his hand. She craned her neck forward to peep through the narrow slit, and caught a gleam of the burnished steel. Terrified she drew back, exclaiming in frightened accents—

"You would not shoot your mother! Oh! wicked, disobedient son!"

"No," he answered, in a voice that reached other ears besides those in his own room. "Its charge is not intended for a woman. But the man who dares to violate the privacy of my room will do so at his own risk. Ay, even if the guru, himself, crosses the threshold of my room with the intention of wresting from me what is mine and mine alone, I shall meet him as man to man and forget his claim to divine right."

Clear as a bell his tones rang through the venetians, striking terror to the hearts of a little knot of silent listeners huddled together beyond his mother. With bated breath they gazed at each other, and whispered that some demon must have possessed the young master. Hitherto he had been so gentle, so compliant to the wishes of his family. Now he had suddenly and unaccountably become defiant and insubordinate. Not only was he acting in direct opposition to his mother's decree, but he had dared to utter the awful threat that he would shoot the swami himself if he ventured to enter his room unbidden.

There was not a single soul, from Lukshmi herself and the watchful Jaganath to the smallest child, who did not tremble at his impious audacity. Doraswamy turned yellow with fear, and, slipping quietly away, he left the doomed house upon which the storm of anathema must sooner or later break. No

amount of propitiation could turn aside the dire consequence of that sacrilegious threat.

The scared members of the establishment crept away, as the big mistress, overwhelmed with weeping, sought her room. There she lay upon her cushions crushed, smitten to the lowest depths of despair. She had not failed to observe, when she passed the chamber occupied by the guru, that the drum of the disciple was lying on the mat, but the drum-beater himself had been summoned into the presence. She shuddered as she pictured the interview that was taking place, and thought of the curses which at that very moment might be fulminated against her recalcitrant son.

A little later the disciple—who was serving his novitiate and would one day be a guru himself—issued from the guru's chamber, and went to the door of Rama Rajah's apartment. He knocked, and, without waiting for a reply, delivered the terrible mandate of the swami. He spoke with an impressive deliberation, weighing each word, and uttering it with distinctness. Having declared the will of the guru he ended with a reminder of the penalty for the disregard of the wishes of the gods.

Jaganath covered his face as the declaration penetrated the venetians, and Lukshmi drew her saree protectively over her head.

He concluded with an unexpected concession. If the Assistant Collector did not wish to attend on his master, his presence might be dispensed with ; but it was imperative that he should send his wife. In the interest of the whole family it was necessary that she should take part in certain ceremonies that had been arranged with the consent of the big mistress.

Rama Rajah made no reply ; the only answer required was immediate action in prompt obedience. The messenger recognized the fact and did not wait. He returned to his mat and took up his post before the guru's door ; but his drum remained silent. The last summons had been delivered, and there would be no further call.

The flickering lamps were stealthily lowered or extinguished

by the domestics. The women in the kitchen washed the vessels used in the evening meal, finished their work hastily and retired to their sleeping-mats—not to sleep but to shiver with fear of impending evil. The house, hushed with the menacing calm that precedes the tempest, became unnaturally still. It seemed as though the very crickets that chirped all night, the lizards that chuck-chucked upon the walls, the muskrats and the mice that roamed the deserted rooms in search of crumbs, were conscious of the weight of approaching calamity, and were subdued to immobility and silence in their dread.

When Lukshmi heard the voice of the disciple, the messenger who came direct from the swami himself, a flash of wild hope passed through her, raising her to a pinnacle of confident anticipation. Her husband would never dare to resist a command that was issued by the swami himself. She darted back to the sitting-room and stood in eager trembling expectation, as a dog waits for the opening of his kennel door when he hears his master's whistle. Her eyes were fastened on the stern impassible figure of her husband in an imploring gaze.

"Let me go! Oh! let me go! The swami calls. I shall be for ever cursed if I do not obey!" she prayed in softer accents of entreaty.

Still Rama Rajah did not move. The messenger departed, and she listened to his retreating steps with a heart that seemed to stand still. She fell on the ground at his feet; she wept and renewed her prayers with increasing importunity. Finding that they were useless, she abandoned herself to unrestrained despair, passing from the softest and most passionate supplications to bitter reproaches. She called upon the swami to come to her, since she was not permitted to seek him. She cried out that she was imprisoned and being maltreated to the danger of her life. Heaping virulent abuse upon her husband, she screamed so that every soul within the house heard and trembled.

The effect of the philtre only served to increase her self-abandonment, and entirely deprived her of what little control she naturally possessed. It was a terrible trial to the man

who kept vigil, as she went with swift succession from one phase of violent emotion to another. His ears were equally offended by the extravagance of her vituperation, and the openly expressed extravagance of her desire. Now and then she called upon various inmates of the house to help her, praying them to release her. But no one ventured to respond or make any sign that she had been heard. Every single soul was aware of the fact that the doors were guarded by a desperate and determined man, close at whose hand lay the deadly weapon, dreaded beyond all others by the timid Hindu.

Patiently Rama Rajah sat by the dishevelled figure that writhed and moaned at his feet, resisting every effort at pacification. When her violence had abated he raised her from the floor and led her to the couch in the bedroom. Not without some tenderness and pity as if for a passionate, ill-regulated child, he arranged the pillows and placed her in a comfortable position. He took a light cotton covering from his own bed and threw it over her, hoping that exhausted nature would find relief in sleep. She accepted all these unusual attentions from a Hindu husband in passive silence and closed her eyes.

He looked at his watch; it was midnight. After the stress and storm of the evening, fatigue suddenly fell upon him, and he glanced at his cot with longing eyes. But sleep for him was out of the question. He must keep his vigil until morning broke. Placing his chair so that he had a full view of the figure of his wife, he sank back with a weary sigh. At first she moved restlessly with frequent sobs and an occasional cry to the swami. Later she became more quiet, and it was with real relief that he watched the more regular breathing which betokened the welcome fact that slumber had descended upon her.

The house was hushed and still. Outside the silence of the night was broken by the various sounds of the active life of the dark hours. The spotted owlets jangled and squabbled on the roof, an ill omen to the occupants, who shuddered as they listened to the discordant notes. From the road came the noise of creaking cart-wheels in the distance, as a string of

loaded vehicles passed. The drivers of the slow patient cattle were all asleep except the man in charge of the foremost cart. With him rested the responsibility of choosing the road and setting the pace. The busy dusty town was quiescent. The lamps upon the sweet-stuff stall and in the toddy-shop were extinguished. Only a chance pariah dog was awake, and his howling was silenced by the mocking chorus of his cousins in the fields.

The hours passed slowly, and Rama Rajah fought against the heaviness that weighed down his eyelids. Lukshmi was safe in the land of dreams ; and, judging from the half-smile that parted her lips, they were of a pleasant nature. He rose to his feet and stretched his limbs. Glancing at the time, he found that it was only half-past one. There were still four hours to dawn. A stir in the sitting-room startled him ; he had forgotten Jaganath. The latter stood in the doorway, gazing at him with inquiry, not daring to speak for fear of awakening the sleeper. With a glance at his wife Rama Rajah joined his cousin, and they moved away.

“She sleeps,” said the tired husband.

“It is well. Now my brother may venture to take his rest. I am here, and I will watch, waking you without fail if she moves.”

Rama Rajah stood for a few seconds in doubt. Jaganath repeated his suggestion, adding that there was no further need for such a close vigil. She would probably sleep till dawn. Inclination, aided by persuasion, prevailed, and the Assistant Collector returned to his wife’s side. With one more scrutinizing glance he went to his cot and stretched himself upon the bed. Scarcely had he settled his head upon his pillow when he fell into a deep slumber.

Jaganath, standing like a ghost in the doorway, listened intently. The regular breathing of both husband and wife reassured him. He moved noiselessly back to his mat behind the office table, where he seated himself in such a position that sleep could not possibly overtake him unawares, and continued the rest of the night’s vigil.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CURSE

THE spotted owlets had returned to their roosting, and were noisily settling themselves to rest after a busy night of sport among the hawk-moths and mice. The sky, paling in the coming dawn, was speckled with flying foxes, seeking their dormitory in the old banyan tree after a feast upon the luscious figs. The jackals, with appetites not so well satisfied, sneaked back to their sheltered lair to curl themselves up in slumber. From the bushes came the twittering of sparrows as they opened their eyes upon another day of impudent trespass and thieving.

Jaganath, with a wakefulness that had never faltered since he sent his cousin to seek the rest he so much needed, lifted his head and listened to the sounds of coming dawn. The lamp still burned upon the table, but through the venetians came the pearly light of the grey sky. It was time for him to rise and go to the kitchen in search of the coffee and rice cakes, which formed the first meal of the household.

He quietly unbolted the door leading into the verandah, and slipped out into the fresh dewy air. The garden, still moist from last night's watering, smelt sweet with blossoms, that in anticipation of the sun's kiss, were beginning to unfold their creased petals. But the veiled beauties of the early morning had no attraction for him. His sole thought was to obtain what he wanted from the women in the kitchen, and hasten back to his deserted post.

He had barely disappeared when Lukshmi lifted her head and gazed round her with the bewilderment of one newly

awakened from a deep sleep. Then her wandering eyes were suddenly arrested by the sight of her husband's unconscious form extended upon his bed. With the sight, the memory of the events of the past evening returned with lurid vividness, and an unpleasant expression sprang into her face, marring its beauty, and bearing witness to the malice that lurked in the depths of her heart. The soft light had gone from her eyes, and her features bore traces of the drug that had been administered, and also of the storm of emotion through which she had passed. Her thoughts were no longer directed towards the guru. They were centred upon herself and her wrongs. Resentment sprang into existence as she recalled the details of her husband's treatment of her. It increased as she thought of the neglected call of the tomtom, the slighted swami, and her own humiliating imprisonment. Lastly, she recalled the menace that had been uttered towards the holy one, and her blood ran cold with fear. Her husband must have lost his senses ; the blind woman had cast a spell over him, and a devil had taken possession of him.

It was no idle conclusion, and she firmly believed that she had discovered the cause of his strange behaviour. There was only one way of remedying the evil. The devil must be cast out, and the spell of the English lady broken.

She rose quietly, and shaking out her crumpled silk draperies, glided to the door leading into the sitting-room. In the doorway she turned to look at the unconscious form of her husband, still wrapped in the heavy sleep of fatigue. The sight served to incense her, and the dull anger in her soul burst into sudden flame. Because of the folly and madness of that one individual, the whole house was to be placed under the curse of their guru. Had Rama forgotten all the teaching of his youth, that he dared to challenge misfortune and bring misery upon the family ? Far better would it be if he were dead and herself a widow ! If only she had a knife ready to hand ! It would be so easy to end all the trouble in one swift blow. The swami could not fail to approve, and he would soften her widowhood with his blessing.

But there was no knife within reach, except an ivory paper-knife, which mocked her with its feebleness. Her eyes rested on the lamp as she cast about for some means of destruction. Could she pour the lighted oil upon his face and blind him? It would be a better punishment, perhaps, to let him live, maimed and useless, at the mercy of his family, than to take his life with the knife. But the lamp was almost exhausted, and the small quantity of paraffin remaining in the receiver was insufficient to do the diabolical work she contemplated.

The many voices of the dawn warned her that the house would soon awaken. With the opening of doors and brewing of coffee, all chance of avenging herself and vindicating the wrongs of the swami would end. The longing for revenge increased as the opportunity slipped away. Ah! It was the swami himself who was whispering his commands in her ear. He was bidding her to do the deed, and to search for a means of carrying it out. She was sure now that she could feel his wonderful power, compelling her to slay the one member of the family who brought dishonour and evil upon them all. It would be the salvation of the house. Could the lightning strike a tree that was already felled? The impending curse could not descend upon a man who was dead. But how was the deed to be done?

She advanced a step into the room, peering round with keen eyes in the dim light for a weapon that would serve her purpose. Suddenly the memory of the revolver flashed across her brain. She had seen her husband take it from a drawer in his writing-table. A shiver of fear passed through her as she thought of the dreaded fire-arm. Only once in her life had she had an opportunity of examining a pistol closely. It was when her husband, on his return from England, unpacked his cases of treasures bought in that distant country. With awed curiosity she had gazed at the fearsome shining thing, while Rama Rajah explained its mechanism, how, by the use of finger and thumb, it could be fired. But she had not dared to touch it, and he placed it in the drawer of his table with a smile at her pretty timidity.

She drew near to that same table and laid her hand upon the little brass handle of the drawer, which opened easily at her pull. The pistol lay there, with the yellow light of the lamp reflected in its cold polished steel, just as Rama Rajah had left it, a ready means of executing her purpose if she could summon up courage to use it. She had no fear of the deed she contemplated, but she shrank from touching the weapon. Yet why should she hesitate? It would be surer than the knife, if she held it close to her victim and placed the muzzle against his heart. He would open his eyes—yes, she would prefer that he should see and recognize in one supreme dread moment the hand that dealt the blow. She would curse him, and then, with an explosion that should rouse the whole house, the pistol should do its deadly work. It was all easy and simple, and yet she still hesitated.

The twittering of the birds in the garden grew louder, and the song of the robin burst forth from the Persian rosebush. A pale primrose light extended fan-shaped from the palm-girt horizon, and spread upwards to the very arch of heaven overhead with tropical swiftness. Already the lamp had grown dim, and the yellow gleams upon the polished surface of the weapon were mingled with the blue reflexions of daylight. A sound of opening shutters came from within the house. The women were beginning to stir in the zenana. In a few minutes voices would be calling her to join them, and Rama Rajah would awake to make her feel again his iron will. It was intolerable. She could not bear it. Either he or she must die. There was the well; she could drown herself. But if she sought the cold depths of the well, haunted by the snake and the frog—the thought of these last made her shiver—she would never see the guru again, nor feel the warm glow rush through her veins, as his dreamy lingering gaze rested upon her. No, she was too young to die; too young to be driven to desperation by a madman of a husband. She must rid herself of his presence, free the family of its incumbrance, and avenge the swami, even though her fate would be widowhood.

With something of the spirit of a self-sacrificing martyr she

conquered her aversion to touch the pistol, and laid her hand upon it. How light it was! and how easy to lift! For a few seconds she stood with her eyes riveted upon it. Then, with a rush of memory, her thoughts centred upon the wrongs of the night. Fixity of purpose took the place of hesitation. She turned and sped across the room towards the open door, the chink of her anklets sounding as she moved.

But it did not disturb the sleeper. Lying just as he had flung himself upon his bed, his breast heaved with the regular breathing of deep slumber. His face was turned away from her and the left arm thrown up above his head. For a few seconds she paused to listen. The first note of the tomtom awoke an echo in the house and fired her intention. She lifted her right hand, and, holding her arm at full length, pointed the muzzle at him.

But no; that was not exactly what she intended. Death should not come suddenly upon the unconscious man. Revenge demanded something more. She wanted to witness the fear of death in his eyes and gloat over his terror. Also he must know whose hand it was that dealt the blow. Lowering the weapon she stepped nearer to the bed, and held the pistol to his breast. Laying her left hand upon his shoulder she shook him gently, only waiting for the opening of his sleep-laden eyes to revile him, and then press, with finger and thumb, as he had once shown her, upon the trigger.

Slowly the lids were raised, for his sleep was heavy, and the man gazed with still dormant brain at his wife, bewildered and uncomprehending.

“Madman! Accursed of the swami! Possessed of the devil! With my hand I slay you and avenge——”

Before she could complete the sentence a violent blow upon the wrist struck the weapon upwards. There was a flash and loud report that deafened Rama Rajah for the moment, and a bullet whizzed above him, striking the wall beyond the bed.

In another instant Jaganath was grappling with the infuriated woman, who turned upon him like a trapped leopard

all teeth and claw. But he was too much for her. Not only did he succeed in wresting the pistol from her hand, but with a deft movement he snatched the sheet from Rama Rajah's bed and flung it over her head. Winding it tightly round her limbs he knotted the ends so that she was as effectually bound as poor unoffending Veerama had been in the sack. It was not done without sustaining a scratch or two, and once her sharp teeth managed to meet upon his arm. With the help of the thoroughly awakened husband, Lukshmi, screaming with rage, even though the sheet was drawn tightly across her mouth, was rendered powerless and placed upon the couch where she had slept.

Jaganath, his face yellowed with the agony of suspense through which he had passed, touched his cousin with an inquiring hand, passing his fingers over his limbs in search of a wound. He drew a sigh of intense relief as the assurance came that he was unhurt, and he led his cousin into the sitting-room where the coffee steamed upon the table.

"It is all right, little brother," said Rama Rajah, his voice unsteady with emotion. "But she would have killed me had it not been for you."

"I was only just in time," he cried.

He described with trembling lips how he had gone to the kitchen believing them both to be sound asleep. He placed the tray upon the table on his return, and crept noiselessly to the bedroom door expecting to find them as he had left them. The sight of Lukshmi bending over her unconscious husband filled him with horror. He darted after her and struck up the weapon. Had she not stayed her hand to awaken him, and gloat with devilish delight in the fear she was so sure of rousing, she would have succeeded in her evil design. Jaganath had undoubtedly saved his life.

"Drink some coffee, sir; it will bring back the blood to your heart."

Rama Rajah's hand shook as he lifted the cup to his parched lips. The attempt on his life had given him a shock; it was so utterly unexpected. As he drank, he heard

the sound of voices outside his door. The report of the revolver had echoed through the house and startled the inmates. At first they had thought that the noise came from the chamber of the guru, and that it was the commencement of his anathemas.

One of the women demanded to be told what had happened. Lukshmi, lying on her couch, heard the question and listened for the reply. The enormity of her action suddenly confronted her. For the first time she realized the fact that she had attempted nothing less than murder, a crime that had its punishment outside the jurisdiction of the zenana. It was possible that she might be handed over to the police.

The Hindus, whatever their caste, have a dread of the officers of the law. Searching questions are put; members of the family are detained at the Police court pending inquiry; and the privacy of the house is invaded. It is true that a caste man is deputed to do the searching and questioning. But he is a stranger, without any consideration for the finer feelings of others, and he puts a number of queries, relevant and irrelevant, that have to be answered.

Lukshmi had heard rumours of other strange doings at the Police Thana which made her shiver. But her fears abated as she listened to the explanation given. Rama Rajah's pistol had been discharged — accidentally? — Oh yes, quite by accident. No one had been hurt. He hoped that his mother had not been frightened by the report. After a few more questions the curiosity and alarm of the household subsided, and the consumption of the informal morning meal was resumed.

Presently another voice was raised outside his door. It was the disciple who announced that the guru was departing; he demanded an interview with the young master.

“Do not go,” whispered Jaganath. “It is only to curse you that he desires your presence.”

But having marked out a line of conduct and taken his stand, he was in no humour to turn his back at the last moment, and hide himself from the sight of the man who

claimed to be the messenger of the gods. Moreover, if the guru intended to pronounce a malediction, the presence of the subject was not necessary. It would be delivered in his absence.

"I will see him as he departs," replied the Assistant Collector, his tone firm and determined. "How soon does he set out?"

"At the moment when the sun mounts above the horizon and casts its first yellow beams across the tobacco fields."

The beat of the tomtom echoed through the house, but there was no other sound. Instead of the busy hum of happy excited humanity, there was silence. The women stood in groups divided between a frantic impulse to hide in the innermost recesses of the zenana, and a desire to indulge their overweening curiosity. They would see with their own eyes what was to happen to the young master. The men of the family, who had followed Doraswamy, had not returned. They judged it safer to keep away from the vicinity of the offender when the bolt fell.

Whimpering and moaning, Lukshmi remained bound upon the couch. She too was dominated by fear; and after the first volume of half stifled shrieks she deemed it wiser not to be too obtrusive. In his desperate wrath the guru might curse indiscriminately instead of confining his anathemas to the head of the sinner. She heard the tomtom, and guessed that its sound presaged the departure of the swami. The mad desire of the night to seek his presence had gone. The one prayer that she breathed at the moment was that she might be forgotten.

Jaganath drew back the bolts and swung open the big doors, whilst Rama Rajah returned to his bedroom to rearrange his dishevelled dress. Ten minutes later he passed through the screen door, and walked slowly to the front verandah. Under the portico rested the palanquin with its crimson curtains and silken cushions, its glittering gold ornaments and burnished brass fittings. The little gang of bearers sat in the pathway silently awaiting their sacred burden.

Though his resistance had been unsaltering, his pulse quickened as the guru approached. The spare figure of the offended visitor was drawn to its fullest height, and the eyes that gleamed from beneath the thick eyebrows blazed with a wild ungovernable fury, like those of a baffled animal. As they fell upon Rama Rajah he burst forth into terrible maledictions. The words seemed to scorch the ears of the Assistant Collector and of all those who listened. But whatever he felt, Rama Rajah preserved his outward calm. His Western education had taught him that the anathemas uttered by men's lips were powerless to hurt, that it was presumption on the part of man to claim the divine authority to curse, that the All-Father was not a God of cursing but of blessing, a beneficent Creator, Who required a very different submission and worship from the sensual service demanded in His Name by the guru.

Under the Western teaching lay the eastern blood, the eastern training of the child, and the inherited instincts of generations. With a force that was well-nigh irresistible those instincts rose now at the lashing of the awful tongue of the guru. Whilst he listened he was assailed with a sudden temptation to abandon his position, to yield unconditionally, to grovel at the feet of the swami, to pray for forgiveness and beg that the chosen of the gods of his ancestors would return to his chamber, and let the past twelve hours be as though they had never existed.

The impulse was momentary. It was crushed and stifled as he stood there with clenched fists, his breath coming in quick gasps, his eyelids quivering. Listing his head still higher Rama Rajah unconsciously showed something of the contempt he felt, whilst he successfully hid the one wave of irresolution that had assailed him; and the guru saw nothing but a scornful defiant heretic in the man before him. His attitude, as well as his obstinate silence, only served to incense the guru further.

“Have you nothing to say, accursed one? Have you nothing to offer to an offended god, nothing to soften his

wrath?" he cried, his dreadful voice ringing through the house and reaching every ear.

Rama Rajah made no reply. There was obviously nothing to say, since there was no repentance. Immovable he faced the angry swami with steady gaze, his firmly closed lips indicating the strength of the will-power that supported him in his rebellion.

"Your tongue refuses to speak ; the gods have paralyzed it in their wrath. Silent you are ; let silence be your portion. Upon you shall fall a silence that is worse than death, and all men shall turn from you in horror. The finger of scorn shall point and cry, 'this is the unhappy wretch who defied his god and disobeyed his decree.'"

Not a single syllable of his malediction escaped the ears of the trembling women huddled together in the background, too terrified to give rein to their lamentations lest the infuriated swami should turn and rend them as well. He passed on, and flung himself upon his cushions. No one but the disciple dared to follow him down the verandah steps to the palanquin, and no little crowd of fawning gratified worshippers pressed round him with obsequious salaams to speed his parting. Upon the top step stood the figure of the Government official, erect and apparently unmoved by curse and threat. Never had guru been so treated, so scorned, so slighted. As the bearers lifted the palanquin, its occupant leaned forward and cast a look of open malignity at the impious blasphemer whose very attitude challenged the curse that had just been delivered.

The disciple began to beat his drum, and the bearers passed out of the shadow of the portico into the golden rays of the morning sun. The procession was bathed in light ; and a cloud of dust arose, enveloping and partially shrouding the retreating figures.

Rama Rajah watched them with a crowd of memories surging back upon him. Though he had reached manhood's estate, and the notion of mystery had been dissipated, his ignorance remained. He was no better informed whence the guru had come nor whither he was going.

The palanquin disappeared in the distance, and the dust settled gradually in powdery layers upon the vegetation of the garden. Undisturbed by the curse of man the black robin continued his song of praise, and the lazy "seven sisters," the last to leave their roosting place, began their garrulous search for the morning meal. Rama Rajah might have been a child once more standing by his grandmother's side, with awed eyes and questions upon his lips which were never answered. Yet it was no child who stood looking after the guru with eyes blind to the beauties of the morning ; but a man who bore the curse of the swami, and who had been threatened with a dire calamity.

The women watched him furtively. Even at that moment to their excited imaginations the curse might be working and the paralysis of the tongue commenced. As long as he remained there no one stirred nor spoke ; but when, at length, he slowly turned his steps towards his room, his mother sought Jaganath.

"Go to him. Speak to him. Ask if he is well ; say something that will call forth a reply."

Obedient to her request he drew near to his cousin.
"Brother, shall I release the young mistress ?"

With bated breath they listened for the reply which they believed—in accordance with the decree of the swami—his tongue would be unable to utter. There was a pause, and then the familiar voice rang out clear and musical in its tone, firm and unfaltering, untouched by sudden affliction of any kind.

"By all means release her, and let her go to her room. Doubtless she will be glad of some breakfast."

Some of the listeners uttered stifled exclamations of astonishment, and they glanced at each other in blank surprise. Could it be possible that the curse had passed harmlessly over his head, and that the swami had no power over him ? In any case the tension was relaxed and they breathed again. With a sigh of relief they returned to their several duties and occupations, subdued by a vague foreboding for the future, but relieved from the fear of immediate calamity.

Rama Rajah's mother entered his room. "My son ! my

son ! my heart is broken ! " she wailed. " You have brought evil upon the house. You are cursed, and though the gods may spare you from the dreadful fate which his holiness called down upon your head, he, who has promised to give you his daughter in marriage, will withdraw that promise. Aiyoh ! a man who is cursed by a holy one is like a crow wandering between the field and the house. Every man's hand is against him, and his whole family is despised and disgraced. How shall we atone for this great evil ? "

CHAPTER XVIII

PARTINGS

THE conversation between Miss Avondean and Sobraon was not without good result. In the first place, much to the vexation of his wife, the tobacco merchant definitely refused the objectionable suitor for his daughter's hand. Desika ventured to remonstrate, but his father quietly silenced him with an indulgent smile, which caused the young man to remember that he was Sobraon's son and not a congress-wallah, whilst he was under his father's roof, a fact that he was in danger of forgetting occasionally.

All restrictions were removed from the intercourse between Veerama and the English lady. The daily visits were renewed, and Dolores was made happy again by the presence of her *protégée*. They were both aware that the time was limited for this sweet companionship, and they valued it accordingly. In a fortnight Dolores was to leave Madura for a cooler climate. Rama Rajah and his family intended to depart about the same time; and Veerama would be re-absorbed into the family life from which she had been taken when she was sent to England. By her father's advice she had consented to the demand of her mother and brother in the matter of restitution to her caste privileges, without which she would be unable to play her part in her brother's approaching nuptials. But the ceremonies were not to be performed until the departure of the English lady.

As for the future, who could say what might be the will of the gods? For five or six months the heat would be too great to permit the European ladies to return, and there was a doubt

as to the plans of Miss Avondean and the date of her voyage back to the old country.

Wisely casting aside all care for the uncertain future Veerama appeared every morning between eleven and twelve, bright and smiling, ready to read or talk, or to lend her assistance to anything that served to amuse Dolores. When questioned about her home life, she answered reservedly, vouchsafing little or no information as to the real state of the domestic atmosphere. Upon the incident of the sack she preserved a strict silence, and Dolores never learned the tale of the attempt to break her will. Instinctively Veerama felt that the gentle English woman would recoil with horror from the mere thought of it, and perhaps unwittingly give lasting offence to the whole family by uttering remonstrance, which would only be received as an unwarrantable interference in family matters.

The Hindu is peculiarly sensitive to external comment upon his inner life. He resents any expression of criticism in the form of either praise or blame from his fellow-countrymen outside the caste circle; and the feeling is not lessened when the criticism comes from a stranger and a foreigner, whose disregard for caste places him on a level with the Pariah. So Veerama, with the buoyancy of youth, avoided all dangerous topics, and gave herself up to the pleasure of the moment, doing her best to forget what life would be like when she should sink back into the domestic routine of the zenana.

Underlying her delight at the reunion with Dolores was the secret hope that she would see Rama Rajah again. The morning after Sobraon paid his call she drove to the house of the Collector. Dolores, sitting in the morning-room, recognized her light step as she entered and opened her arms. Like a fluttering humming bird she threw herself into the warm embrace with murmurings of joy. The morning passed quickly. Lunch was served, and Veerama took her food at the well-appointed table served by the pariah servants. After lunch Dolores consented to rest upon the sofa, and Veerama curled herself upon a large easy-chair with an illustrated magazine to amuse her. But though her eyes rested upon

the pictures and sometimes upon the letter-press, her attention frequently wandered. Her ears were turned towards the verandah ready to catch the sound of a step. But instead of Rama Rajah came the handsome English officer. At the hour when the tea-cups made their appearance he never failed to join Mrs. Newent and her guests in the drawing-room during his short stay. It was as well, perhaps, that Rama Rajah did not hear the light, good-natured banter that frequently passed between the party. Ravellion never failed to direct some of his shafts at Veerama. He was much attracted towards her and was quick to note her abstraction. It roused him into unremitting efforts to dissipate it, and he was not satisfied until he had succeeded in bringing back the sparkle to her eyes and the response to her tongue.

Mrs. Newent looked on now and then with a vague dread lest the flirtation should lead to trouble. As far as she knew, Ravellion was fancy-free ; and Veerama, like a well-behaved Hindu maid, should have no attachment until she was bidden to love where her parents had chosen. More than once she tried to divert Ravellion's attentions and chaff. But it only added zest to his pursuit and made him more persistent.

It was the day of the guru's departure, a day of dread in Rama Rajah's household. The swami, as we know, had pronounced the sentence of silence against the young master : and the credulous women who heard it looked confidently for the moment when his tongue should shrivel, and perhaps fall out of his mouth like a leaf from a blasted tree.

When they found during the long hours of the day that he retained all his powers of speech, that he could reprove the syce for untidiness, and blame the coachman for tarnished harness before driving to the Kutcheri, that he could eat his midday meal, issue orders to the peons, and reply to the petitions of the supplicants in the verandah of his office-room, their courage returned ; and like the people who watched the apostle after the snake had bitten him, they were disposed to believe that, far from being a sinner, he possessed a divine power as great as that of the guru.

It was whispered by Lukshmi that perhaps the curse of silence was intended to be fulfilled in another way, through the process known to the English schoolboy as "putting him into Coventry." Soon after the suggestion had been made a rumour ran through the house that if a word was addressed directly to the young master the speaker's tongue would blister. This theory collapsed when it was seen that Jaganath, who conversed freely with his cousin on the subject of an impending camping tour in the district, did not suffer in any way. Jaganath ate his food without burning his tongue ; his voice showed no sign of mysterious hoarseness, and his throat was not afflicted with soreness.

As for Rama Rajah himself he had no fear of evil, although the words of the guru still rang in his ears with unpleasant distinctness. If dread entered his mind at all, it was the dread lest the whole house, believing itself to be under a ban, should look for misfortune and find it. He already detected signs of anxiety in the abnormal silence with which the family pursued the routine of daily work. Jaganath was the only member who spoke in his natural tone and behaved in his usual manner. As he drove away towards the Kutcheri the shadow of a smile crossed his face at the unwonted hush that had fallen upon the zenana.

Lukshmi found herself the object of both reproach and condolence. She vehemently disclaimed any responsibility, and laid the entire blame upon her husband. Of the incident connected with the revolver she said nothing, and Jaganath kept his counsel, not from any love of his cousin's wife but because he had been bidden to do so by Rama Rajah.

As the day wore on they all took fresh heart, and when, an hour after sunset—in good time to partake of the evening meal—Doraswamy, with other male members of the family, returned, there was a distinct rise in spirit throughout the whole house.

In the afternoon Rama Rajah was strongly tempted to seek Dolores. Half an hour of her society would have done much to restore the equilibrium of his mind. But he doubted

his power of reticence with the friend of his youth. The inclination to pour forth his troubles and receive her sympathetic counsels would be too strong to resist. She would put questions to him which would be impossible to answer. He could not explain to her exactly what it was that the guru demanded, but without that explanation she would be unable to understand why his refusal to comply evoked a curse.

Then there was the probable presence of other people which would preclude all private conversation. Among them would be Veerama. And if by any chance he found an opportunity of telling the story, she, being a Hindu, would shrink from a man who was laid under a curse by a swami, even though she belonged to a lower caste herself.

Therefore he returned to his own house without paying the call, and Veerama watched in vain for a sight of his familiar figure. And when at sunset the carriage waited under the portico to take her home, it was not altogether a happy maiden who clung silently to Dolores in her parting embrace.

The next morning, when she appeared, Dolores said, "I have received a letter from Rama Rajah. We shall not see much more of him, I am sorry to say. Last evening he started for his last tour in the district before handing over charge to his successor. He is going on leave."

"For how long?" asked Veerama, with a little catch in her breath.

She was glad that Dolores could not see her tell-tale face where the warm blood enriched the tone of her skin, nor her trembling fingers as they interlaced themselves upon her lap.

"He has taken three months' privilege leave."

"Then he will be back before you return."

Dolores paused before she replied. Did she know that she was about to deal a blow, and in her gentleness hesitate to strike?

"It is possible that he may not come back to Madura. I promised his mother that I would try to obtain his transfer to Tinnevelly, where his old home is."

"Through the Collector?" asked Veerama, faintly.

"No, through a friend who is in Council and whom I shall meet on the hills."

Dolores went on to describe who the friend was and what pleasure it would give the whole family to return to their ancestral estate. Then she gently broke to her silent listener the fact that she, herself, might not come back to Madura. She had promised to pay a visit to Madras after her stay on the hills, and when that was accomplished the time would arrive for her to take the voyage to England.

Veerama heard the sentences like one in a dream, following their meaning with difficulty. One fact rose in gigantic proportion before her eyes, blinding her to every other detail. Rama Rajah was going away almost immediately, and in all probability he would not return to Madura. But though her heart ached she hid the wound, and presently she was ministering to the blind lady's amusement with a semblance of her usual cheerfulness, and replying to Ravellion's chaff with an appearance of fun and enjoyment she was far from feeling.

The days passed quickly in the European as well as in the Hindu households. There was much packing to be done in both. Humanity, whether fair-skinned or dark, must eat and sleep and be clothed. So the Collector's wife was busied over warm frocks, plate, glass, house-linen, and other necessaries that would be required in the half-furnished house she had taken on the hills. And the Assistant Collector's mother was occupied with the safe despatch to Tinnevelly of camphor-wood boxes containing clothes, and baskets holding copper and brass cooking utensils, lamps, and other household treasures.

In Veerama's house there was no bustle. The manufacture of pickles and preserves formed the only excitement in the establishment. In view of the coming festivities connected with Desika's marriage the quantity required seemed unlimited. Sobraon's wife never lost an opportunity of grumbling at her daughter for abandoning her in the midst

of her household cares. Nothing was said before Sobraon himself. He was a busy man and his business took him away from home. But even had he been idle, like Doraswamy, he would have seen next to nothing of his wife and daughter in the absence of the domestic social life of the Hindu home. His wife placed very little restraint upon her tongue. She heaped reproof upon Veerama at every opportunity, detailing her wrongs and wailing over her grievances.

The poor girl began to dread the very sight of her mother. She hurried over her toilet and the consumption of her solitary meals, so that she might escape from the house and find temporary refuge with her friend. There she forgot for a while the persecution in the pleasure of Dolores' society, and in the secret anticipation of seeing Rama Rajah once more after his return from camp.

He came back from the district looking all the better for the change. His family gazed inquiringly into his face, searching closely for signs of the working of the curse. He spoke as fluently as ever, and his voice had lost none of that high-bred resonance that Dolores loved so well. His limbs were sound, and all his powers, physical as well as mental, were unimpaired. There was not the faintest shadow of a curse to be seen in his person or in his bearing.

His mother drew a deep breath of relief. She loved her son dearly, and, in spite of all the strange customs that he had learned in that foreign country where he had received his education, she was very proud of him. The dread of calamity left its impress upon her face, deepening the lines about her mouth, and clouding her eyes with anxiety. For the first time since the departure of the guru she was seen to smile as he entered the women's quarters to greet her on his return.

Lukshmi also examined him with a gaze that was full of wondering curiosity. But, as she realized his sound condition of body and mind, no smile of thankfulness curved her lips. Something like a vague feeling of disappointment filled her vindictive mind. It was dreadful to be cursed by a holy man, and she was, in a way, sorry for any unfortunate person who

laid himself open to be banned. But since the ban had been placed, upon him why had it failed? Had the swami pretended to a greater power than he possessed? Or had her husband gained some subtle lore in that foreign country by which he was able to avert the doom pronounced by the guru? The thought was not pleasant. She believed in all gurus, pujaris, and sanyasis. It was disturbing to her faith when their words were not fulfilled, whether they promised benefits or fulminated maledictions. There was none of the relief and joy that filled the elder lady's mind when the eyes of the young wife rested upon the handsome form of her husband, safe in every respect, and manifestly better for his trip.

"The day after to-morrow I shall be ready to leave at sundown. We will take the night-mail to the South, and the morning sun will see us in the old home. You will be pleased, my mother."

She lifted eyes that were full of tears to his face.

"Ay, my son, I should be glad indeed were it not for the curse of the guru."

"Think no more of his foolishness, mother. Words can hurt no one," he cried, hoping to inspire her with some of his own confidence.

"Thoughts breed words, and out of words come deeds. How can any one say that words will do no hurt?" she replied distrustfully.

He endeavoured to lead her mind to other subjects. "We will leave the curse behind us for the next tenant of the house. Have you packed up all your property?"

"Most of it is despatched, and your father and aunt, with other members of the family, have gone on ahead to prepare for our coming. Have you settled the Shorapore dispute?"

"It is to be arranged by my successor, who will also assess the kist that I have had under consideration."

"Bah! what can an Englishman know of the rights and wrongs of Hindu disputes? These matters should have been left to you, my son, and they should have been settled by now."

Too well he divined the bent of her mind. He sighed as

he departed to his own room, where Jaganath was busy with trunks and packing-cases. Later he entered his brougham and drove to the house of his chief.

This was to be the last meeting for the present between himself and Dolores. She and Miss Beauchamp were to start that afternoon with Mrs. Newent for the Pulney Hills. There was but a short distance to travel by rail, but the road journey to the foot of the hills was more serious, as it meant a night in the bullock transit. With plenty of servants and coolies the flittings in India are comparatively easy to accomplish. The chief difficulty consists in being patient over the unhurried movements made by all who serve, and to reconcile the mind to the slow progress of the road as the cattle toil along in the heat and dust.

Unable to do anything for herself, but exercise the wonderful patience that she possessed, Dolores sat quietly beneath the punkah with Veerama, whilst others were busy with the boxes. At the sound of his step she rose to her feet with an eager welcome and a slight flush of the pale cheeks.

“I am glad that you have returned from the district in time to come and say good-bye, Rama Rajah,” she cried, as she held his hand.

He looked wistfully at the sweet face and the unseeing blue eyes, and as he gazed he felt the impulse strong upon him to pour out his troubles into her willing ears. But he resisted the temptation, and turning to Veerama greeted her with his usual courtesy. As she lifted her eyes to his, her heart seemed to sink and die within her breast. The light that once burned under those lashes was gone; the thrill in his voice as he had once uttered her name had departed, and the magical spell of that supreme moment was dispelled like a dream of the night. It was the Vellalan who confronted the Shanar and condescended to be gracious; and the Shanar, in spite of all her Western teaching of social equality, once again succumbed to the instinctive consciousness of caste inferiority. With the death of all hope she retired into the shell of her natural reserve, timid and humble before the higher caste.

Perhaps if the memory of their last meeting had not arisen in Rama Rajah's mind, and if he could have forgotten the easy bearing of Ravellion towards Veerama and her apparent pleasure in receiving the attentions of the Englishman, the difference of caste might not have intruded itself so strongly. Under the sting of unreasoning jealousy, the inferiority of her birth forced itself upon him, and influenced all his actions during the hour that he spent with Dolores.

Dolores, herself, had heard the greeting, and with her marvellous perception, had comprehended how matters stood. And she was glad that it should be so. Without analyzing her own feelings she had decided that there must be no encouragement of sentiment between them. Rama Rajah was a married man, and as such, there should be nothing more than friendship.

Friendship ! The day has not yet dawned when the bond of real friendship is possible between the Hindu man and the Hindu woman, even though they be father and daughter, brother and sister, or even husband and wife.

Except when Dolores addressed her directly, and obtained the answer that common courtesy demanded, Veerama was silent. She listened to the conversation with down-cast eyes, sitting motionless upon her chair, her hands locked in a nervous grip, the sole sign of the agony within. The curse of caste—a far greater curse than was ever uttered by wrathful guru—descended upon her with blighting effect, withering the youthful aspirations of her heart, crushing out hope and freezing the warm gushing stream of love and passion into cruel death. The minutes fled all too quickly, and the hour was nearly gone. Rama Rajah prepared to take his leave.

"It has been very good to meet you again, Ranee. You have given me fresh strength to persevere in the battle of life."

"Have I, Rajah? I am glad," she replied simply.

"I must see you again, when you come back from the hills."

"To be sure. Where shall we meet?" she asked.

"Probably in Madras. I shall apply for a few days' leave on purpose."

"Won't you pay us a visit while we are on the Pulneys?"

"There would be difficulties," he replied.

"Ah, yes; I forgot, when I suggested it, that your caste would not permit you to be my guest. Well, we will meet in Madras."

There was a ring of regret in her voice as she said farewell; but she put on a brave face and a cheerfulness that she was far from feeling. Afterwards he turned to Veerama.

"Good-bye; I hope we shall also meet again some time or other. We have one thing in common, our friend, Loree," he said in English as he shook her hand formally.

For one instant their eyes met; for just one instant there flashed across him a wild regret, such as a man might feel at the closing of a door that shuts off home and friends for ever. The emotion was stifled instantly, and in another moment he was gone, whilst Dolores and her companion stood as he had left them, listening to the sound of his retreating footsteps.

Months ago, when Dolores first contemplated making the journey to the East and renewing her friendship with Rama Rajah, she was confident that the threads would be gathered up where they had been dropped. A vague feeling of disappointment over-shadowed her when she discovered that there were many links missing in the golden chain woven in her youth. From the very first hour of their meeting she was conscious that a barrier had arisen, which forced them to draw apart. Strive as she would to beat it down, to ignore it, to stretch forth her hand across it, she had never succeeded in surmounting it. There had been moments of confidence when he seemed to turn to her with something of the old clinging friendship. But as soon as she endeavoured to comfort and counsel, as in the days of his boyhood, or attempted to probe and dispel his difficulties, she was met by this barrier. If she expressed a doubt that the confidence was not as complete as in past days, he replied with a sigh—

"Ranee, you do not, you cannot understand the conditions of my life, of my caste."

Caste ! caste ! It was always caste that crippled every move for freedom, caste that bound the soul ; it was caste that severed their lives and destroyed that golden bond of sweet friendship, which was one of the few blessings that had entered her darkened life.

A little sob caught her ear, and broke the train of thought. She turned to the girl at her side, whose presence she had forgotten.

"Veerama, I have you still," she cried, putting out her hand.

The girl caught it with a sudden gust of unrestrained passion. Dolores dropped back into her chair, and Veerama fell at her feet, bursting into a storm of weeping. Her bowed form shook with uncontrollable sobs that choked all speech. Dolores did not speak. She understood something of the nature of her sorrow, and dared not trust herself to utter consolation which could only sound hollow and artificial. There was nothing to be said. She herself realized the hopelessness of the future, and how useless it was to struggle. Rama Rajah must pass on in the way of life marked out for him by his birth. That road led him apart from the two women who had brought intellectual happiness into his existence. By the same inexorable fate those two women were about to part with little prospect of meeting again. Caste was rising to envelop Veerama, enmeshing her in its web, and drawing her back into the zenana where Dolores could never follow. Like rivers compelled to follow the separate courses allotted to them by fate, their paths could never join except through some convulsion that would mean tribulation, and perhaps destruction, if not to themselves, to others.

By-and-by the sobs lessened, and Sobraon's daughter regained her self-possession. She rose to her feet. The hour had arrived when she, too, must take leave of the friend whose hand had opened a door and let in light upon her obscure life. As she realized that Dolores was passing out of her world, it

seemed that the fingers of her mother were stretched forth to grip her by the arm and draw her back into the twilight of the zenana. She shuddered with a nameless dread, and a feeling of despair that comes only to the young. The restoration of her caste would rivet the fetters that bound her to the observances of her religion, and deprive her of the many little liberties that had been so sweet. The light and joy brought by Dolores into her life must be screened and shut off until all was dull and grey. The past would be nothing but a memory. Despair deepened as she contemplated the future, and her sorrow found words as she clung to Dolores.

“Oh ! why did my father ever send me to England ! Why did he open my eyes only to plunge me into the darkness again ? I was a contented child in the zenana until I knew you. But now that I have tasted liberty and seen light, it will kill my spirit to cast me back into the cruel prison that caste ordains for its women.”

“Hush, Veerama ! have patience, my child !” cried Dolores, distressed and unnerved.

“Patience ! say rather madness !” exclaimed Veerama, passionately. “My world is chaos ! You and my mother point in opposite directions. Her right is your wrong ; what you say is wrong, she declares is right. Which am I to follow ? The will of my mother, or my Western education and the precepts of my beloved lady ?”

For answer, the tears of Dolores were mingled with those of the unhappy Veerama.

CHAPTER XIX

A PILGRIMAGE

THE north-east monsoon had failed partially over the southern portion of the Peninsula. The land under what is known as dry cultivation—that is, dependent on local rainfall—was suffering from a water famine. Where the country was irrigated there was not so much drought. The clouds that rolled in from the Bay of Bengal gave a daily promise of downpour, which was not fulfilled; but they were caught by the hills and forced to discharge their treasure. It was not a liberal supply, but it saved the crops on the wet lands.

Doraswamy's estate lay in one of these tracts of wet lands, and received a certain proportion of moisture. The cultivators' labours had not been in vain, and, though it was not exactly a year of plenty, the broad smiling fields of the Vellalan landlord had yielded a harvest that sufficed to pay the wages of the ryots in kind. The estate had been well looked after by the relatives left in charge; and Doraswamy and his wife were satisfied, as indeed they had every reason to be, with the results.

At no great distance the dreaded finger of drought was laid upon the land. The black cotton soil that produced its snowy crop year after year without the aid of manure was sterile under the brazen rays of the sun. The showers had failed, and the tender leaves and buds of the cotton plant had shrivelled into death.

Beyond the region of the black cotton soil towards the south-east coast the flat lands had become real deserts. Their wells and pools were dry, the villagers were starving—not for

want of food, for that could be brought by the iron road—but for the precious water which no railroad could carry.

The Vellala family was duly self-congratulatory that crops had been vouchsafed to them when others were denied the blessing of the gods ; and there would not have been a cloud upon their horizon had it not been for the memory of the guru's curse.

Upon the mind of Rama Rajah it made no lasting impression and left no dread. His education had long ago swept away his belief in the supernatural powers of pujaris, gurus, bairagis, and sanyasis.

Jaganath was not so happy, though he did his best to follow his cousin's example and cast aside the gloomy forebodings that occasionally assailed him. The rest of the family believed in the guru, and though they had ceased to look for a sudden catastrophe, they dreaded lest some calamity should yet happen to the son and heir, lest some evil spirit of dumbness should take possession of him and fulfil the prophecy.

After many discussions in the privacy of the zenana, the big mistress announced that it would be well for the whole family, and Rama Rajah in particular, if a pilgrimage were undertaken to the great temple of the South, Ramésaram. To ensure better crops next year, as well as to appease the gods, a journey to the shrine of Rama would be expedient and wise. The proposal was greeted with loudly expressed satisfaction. An expedition to one of the great temples is looked forward to with all the eagerness that attends the summer excursion of the holiday-maker in Europe. In addition to the religious exercises there were the diversions and amusements always to be found where the Hindus congregate for their feasts, the processions, the music, and lastly the gay laughing crowd buying fairings of the hawkers, and from the stalls in the outer courts of the buildings. The pleasant anticipation of the pilgrimage did more to dispel the dejection into which every member of the family, except Rama Rajah, had fallen than any other device which the head of the house could have chosen.

The temple selected stands on an island situated in the

strait that divides Ceylon from India. This island lies like a huge stepping-stone between the mainland and Adam's Bridge. Once upon a time, so says the legend of the Hindus, the god Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, made war upon Ravana, the king of the demons, who carried away Seeta, Rama's wife, to Ceylon. When the deity reached Ramésaram his advance was checked by the sea. Then came Hanuman, the monkey god, with his legion of long-tailed workers, and they built a bridge in the shape of a reef or shoal that lies between the Indian island of Ramésaram, and the Ceylon island of Manaar. Rama crossed by the bridge with his warriors and defeated the demon sovereign, and recovered his wife.

Thousands of pilgrims go yearly from all parts of India to perform two duties at the temple of Rama, and thereby earn the blessing of the god. One is to bring offerings, and the other is to bathe where the waters of the Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal meet at Adam's Bridge.

The mandate went forth in the family of Doraswamy that all the members who could be spared were to make the pilgrimage to Ramésaram, each individual carrying a special offering of propitiation to avert misfortune.

Only three weeks of the three months' leave taken by the Assistant Collector had elapsed when the little troop, numbering some sixteen or seventeen, set forth upon the journey. The first part was accomplished in bullock-carts, by which they slowly traversed the dusty roads to the railway station. The train whirled them through wide tracts of black cotton soil and past dreary stretches of land, paralyzed into temporary death by the iron grip of drought. From the cotton districts they entered a broad belt of sandy expanse, as level as the ocean itself. It was bare of vegetation under the present conditions, except for the palmyras that stood, like petrified rather than living trees, upon the vast plain in melancholy rows and groups, and occasionally in solitary isolation. They seemed to be looking in hopeless resignation for the crashing thunder and hissing rain that did not come.

At length the dry arid atmosphere, which scorched the

eye-balls and parched the throat gave way to a cool moist breeze blowing in from the sea; and on either side, as the train ran along the ever narrowing promontory, the two oceans shone in lines of shimmering white. The water lapped the pale sand with a gentle wash. White-sailed boats glided lazily upon the sunlit waves, carrying the pilgrims to and from the sacred island, across the narrow channel that divided it from the mainland. The sky was cloudless, and a soft haze of heat veiled the horizon with gossamer lightness, obliterating nothing, but enveloping the tropical scene with a magic mantle of enchantment. The islets dotted about the channel glinted with opalescent lights, and their groves of plumed palms were gently swept by the wind off the sea.

With a deep sense of relief the party of travellers left the hot dusty carriages, together with a crowd of other passengers bent upon a similar mission. After the flat colourless landscape seen through the quivering heat, the sight of the sea was a joy to every pilgrim, and each one was eager to reach it without any unnecessary delay. To the very end of the curious barb-shaped promontory that stretches out a friendly arm to Ceylon, they went, walking along the well-beaten road, past the strange umbrella acacias and luxuriant palms to the landing-stage, where a steam launch waited to take them across to the big island.

Their journey was not at an end when they left the little steamer. Eight miles had still to be traversed along the ancient pilgrim road before the temple could be reached. This road has a flagged footway on each side. The stones are worn smooth with the tread of the feet of millions of pilgrims who through ages have passed over them. The centre is for wheeled vehicles, pony-carts, and bullock-bandies, of which there is a constant stream coming and going at festival periods.

The Vellala family was provided with a sufficient number of bullock-carts to carry them and all their various parcels and bundles containing amongst other things their votive gifts. The travelling was slow, the constant traffic on the road

rendering it anything but easy going. It was a bright gay scene. The flagged footpaths were more thickly thronged than the roadway. Old men hobbled cheerily along, supporting themselves with stout sticks. Old women with bent backs, lined faces and flat wrinkled feet, followed the younger and fleet-footed members of the family at their own pace. Here an ancient dame carried a favourite hen under her arm, which she had not had the heart to leave behind to strangers and starvation. Another had a pet monkey seated upon her shoulders. A third led a dusty yellow puppy by a string. A fourth bore her grandchild across her hips. Others had bundles of various sizes, baskets containing fruit and vegetables, brass bowls full of honey and butter as offerings. Happiness sat upon the faces of all, young and old. No one hurried; no one grumbled at the heat and dust; no one pressed eagerly in front of his fellow-traveller. There was no need. The weather would remain fine; the welcome at the temple was always there, and the water where they must bathe would be blue and shining and ready for the pilgrims to wade waist deep in its limpid ripples. The family parties came and went in a never ceasing succession, chattering gaily among themselves, paying no heed to strangers except to stare with curious eyes at anything that might seem strange and unusual.

The stream of humanity flowing along through sunlight and shadow, the brilliant scarlet and white clothes, the various temples by the wayside, the rest-houses with groups of pilgrims seated on the raised verandahs, the trees and the groves of palms, the curling clouds of golden dust formed a strange and fascinating scene upon which Rama Rajah gazed in deep contemplation. He had been taken to Ramésaram when he was a child. He remembered the pilgrimage as a pleasant leisurely excursion of the nature of a picnic. He recalled the awe with which he clung to his father's skirts as the pujari came forward and received his gifts, and how he held back the little fist-full of rupees, not daring to cast them into the brass bowl extended towards him. Then his father took his wrist and held the closed hand over the bowl, and with encouraging

words bade him open his fingers. The silver fell with a chink that seemed still to ring in his ear. Imitating his parent closely in all his actions he prostrated himself before the mysterious temple man, touching the ground with the eight members, hands, feet, knees, head, and breast, received as his reward the benediction and the gift of sacred ashes. He was going now in a very different spirit. Was he to be a worshipper or only a spectator? Was he one of, and one with, this huge crowd of simple suppliants, toiling contentedly and in absolute faith along the road through the sun to the great temple?

The carts rumbled and creaked as they dipped in and out of the ruts and plunged into the soft sand of the road, jolting their occupants indiscriminately. It was with a sense of relief that the party climbed down from their vehicles before the gate of the temple, stretching their cramped limbs, knotting up the loosened bundles and rearranging the contents of the various baskets.

Rama Rajah, wearing native dress, drew apart from the little gathering, leaving his parents to settle upon the programme of the different days' doings as they should see best. There was the bathing in the sea at some distance from the temple, an operation that would take up some time. There were several ceremonies to be performed in the temple itself, processions to take part in, and large assemblies to attend.

The wedge-shaped towers rose clear and sharp against the blue sky, dwarfing the palms, and making the men and women constantly passing in and out of the gateway appear like ants. He had seen a crowd of English worshippers pass in and out of the great west doors of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, a sombre serious crowd that went to worship the God of the Christians. But those grave-faced worshippers were not more earnest, more full of faith for all their gravity, than the cheerful smiling crowd now pressing in to the heathen shrine. The needs of humanity in the East were the same as those in the West, and the blessings craved were the same—good health, prosperity, and the preservation of life. Rising from each human soul identical petitions went up to the great God,

though not exactly in the same words. "Give us day by day our daily bread," "Forgive us our sins," "Deliver us from evil," "For thine is the power for ever and ever." What would Dolores think of it? She could not fail to be impressed. The thought of her seemed to place him in touch with her spirit, and he could shape the questions for himself that would fall from her lips.

Brahmins never defile their worship with blood sacrifices. Though many of them in the South are accused of possessing a leaning towards demonolatry, the hideous rites do not enter into the ritual performed at the big temples, and the eye is not offended by anything that is revolting. To the spectator, who knows nothing of the personality of the dasi, the guru, the sanyasi, the pujari, the ceremonial seems to contain only the primitive expressions of a simple religion as pure in its object as the worship in St. Paul's Cathedral.

At sunset the party, clothed in clean new garments, entered the gateway, and passed up one of the colonnades of the great enclosure. The light of the setting sun illuminated the lofty temple towers. Below the towers the buildings were full of deep shadows, out of which twinkled yellow points of light from the oil lamps. The quadrangle was filled with worshippers, none of whom on this occasion were to enter the shrine. The rich tints of their oriental drapery harmonized with the warm browns of the masonry, and presented a scene of colour that glowed with vitality.

The eager worshippers pressed forward towards the open door of the shrine. Within the adytum, which none but the Brahmins might enter, the idol was receiving adoration. To the learned it was not the image that was adored but the divine essence that deigned to rest within it, that divine afflatus which the guru had claimed as reposing in his own body. The beat of tomtom and the chant of dasi and pujari came forth from the open door. When at length the pujari himself appeared, holding aloft the sacred water, there was a sudden pressing forward to obtain a few drops of the precious liquid which caused the partial separation of the family party.

Then the worshippers bent their knees and bowed their heads in awed adoration, in the certain hope that their supplications for the general good of the community were heard, and the deity propitiated.

The eye of the spectator watches the movements of the actor upon the stage as he plays a part. The tragedy unfolds itself with deeds that move the heart to its very depths. As the people who gaze are held spell-bound by the magic art of the actor, and believe for the moment in the reality of his agony and his bliss, so Rama Rajah felt the reality of all that was implied in the scene before him. And when the crowd bent the knee and prostrated themselves before the god, Rama, he too offered the salutation that was an evidence of his belief. A strange tumult stirred within his breast. Was this magnificent temple, this noble ceremonial merely a sham, a piece of meaningless folly? It could not be.

Rama Rajah had long ago relinquished his childlike belief in the supernatural power of the heathen deities, and conquered the awe and superstition with which he had been taught to regard their symbols. It is true that he had not accepted Christianity nor entertained a thought of becoming a Christian. But the beliefs of his youth had melted away before the clear light of Western thought; and Rama, at whose temple he worshipped, was no longer a personal god but a legendary hero, who had warred with a demon king to recover a wife, and who had accepted the aid of a horde of monkeys.

Yet as he stood there, a little apart from his father and mother, his wife, and the little group of relations, he was impelled to join them in their act of adoration. It might be a crumbling creed with its degenerate lapses; but the worship was genuine, and the god to whom it was addressed was intensely genuine to every unit of that great assembly; and when he fell on his knees with his father and mother he was carried away by a deep pulsating emotion as the audience is carried away when the actor triumphs.

Again the tomtoms sounded, the people voiced their adoration, the torch-bearers swayed their flambeaux in the

growing darkness, and the smoke of the burning incense and camphor ascended before the open door of the shrine. The orange light on the towers reddened as the sun dropped below the horizon, and the shadows deepened to a ruddy madder-brown against the rosy purpling sky. The lamps upon the towers were lighted by unseen hands, and looked out eastward with steady unblinking gaze to the murmuring sea. It seemed to the worshippers that the deity stirred, that the smell of the camphor and incense reached his nostrils, that their adoration touched his ears. The great god Rama turned to them ; he smiled ; and in his smile was the promise of plenty, of the blessed rain, the promise of health and freedom from disease, the promise of all the material benefits that humanity could desire.

His mother had marked the attitude of her son with thankful heart, but his wife smiled scornfully. Of what use was submission in ceremonial when he mocked and insulted the messenger of the gods ? Presently they rose to their feet. There was more chanting and beating of drums as the pujaris withdrew, passing into the inner recesses of the shrine. The torch-bearers extinguished their lights, and to the fervid imaginations of the watching people it seemed as though the deity, having blessed them, had once more closed his eyes in sacred immobility. There was nothing more to wait for. The Great All-father had listened, had smiled, had granted their requests. It was enough. They might depart in peace to their evening meal and to their sleep under the starry arch of heaven.

The crowd turned to leave the enclosure. Rama Rajah was the first of his party to walk away. He was followed closely by Jaganath, who touched him upon the arm before they reached the gateway. By the slightest indication he pointed out the figure of the guru standing motionless near one of the many columns. The tall upright form was plainly discernible in the twilight, and there was no doubt about his identity. He was naked to the waist, and his hair hung over his shoulders in glossy waves. Sacred ashes marked his forehead

and chest, and his eyes were fixed in dreamy contemplation upon the shrine. He was not there as a worshipper nor as a spectator. He had no sins on his conscience to expiate, and no supplications to make to the deity. But his presence brought blessings to others, by whom he might be consulted as to propitious hours of starting on a journey, or performing a ceremony.

"The swami has not seen us," whispered Jaganath, with manifest relief.

"What matter if he had," returned Rama Rajah, carelessly.

"There is still the curse."

"To frighten the women who are over-superstitious by nature, and cannot help their foolish fears."

They spoke beneath their breath as they were held up by a block in the crowd. It was impossible that their words could have reached the ears of the guru, but Jaganath shuddered as he fancied that he could detect the sudden curving of the full lips into a mysterious smile. It did not escape the notice of Rama Rajah, but he ascribed it to some turn of thought in the contemplation of the man as he watched the crowd. And when, a few minutes later, he passed with the rest of the people out of the enclosure and lost sight of the figure, he quickly forgot the encounter in the more material consideration of where he was to take his evening meal; the fact being that he was already beginning to miss the English comforts and civilization of the bungalow at Madura.

A happy week full of excitement and amusement passed for the family of Doraswamy. Rama Rajah saw no more of the guru and forgot his very existence. The last evening arrived; the puja was over as far as they were concerned; their prayers were said and their offerings presented, and they were to start for home on the following morning. They had found a lodging in one of the many rest-houses upon the flagged road, where they had made themselves comfortable with all the accessories they had brought with them.

Rama Rajah had eaten his supper with his father and the

other male members of the family, the food being served under the superintendence of his mother. When the excellent but simple meal was finished, Doraswamy led the way to the raised verandah that overlooked the road and prepared to enjoy a cigar and a chat. Rama Rajah was about to follow when his mother called him.

“What is it, mother?”

“On the day of our arrival the guru was in the temple enclosure.”

“I saw him as we came out. Did he lay any more curses upon the family?”

“Hush, my son, it is not good to flout the tiger that roams in its own jungle. Though he is far away by now in the Island of Ceylon, whither he was going the day after we saw him, he knows all that is in our thoughts.”

Rama Rajah resisted the impulse to laugh at his mother's fears, and inquired what his holiness had said. She explained that she had consulted him concerning the pilgrimage so ardently desired by his wife, and the swami had recommended Lukshmi to go to the temple of Karlipet.

“Many women who have made the pilgrimage have been blessed. The temple lies some distance from the railway, and the journey must be done in a bullock-cart. I prayed the swami to forgive your sacrilegious behaviour, and for the sake of your wife to tell me if the boon she craved were likely to be granted.”

“What did he say?” asked the Assistant Collector, with an odd mixture of impatient disbelief and eager curiosity to hear the reply.

“He was gracious and full of kindness. The temple is well chosen, he said; and to-morrow will be a propitious day for setting out on the journey. He bade me hope, but warned me that you and your wife must travel unattended by any member of the family.”

“I shall take Jaganath,” interrupted Rama Rajah.

“He cannot accompany you to the temple. He may wait at the station for your return, but that is all. The presence of

a third person, especially of a man, may detract the attention of the swami, and all your trouble will be for nothing."

"He need not be with us when we make the offering."

"No, no, my son. In this matter you must please your mother, and submit to the arrangements she makes. Your wife will present a rich offering and you will both return. If my hopes are fulfilled I will not press on this second marriage just yet, as the girl is full young. And her father still fears the guru's curse. But if I am disappointed, we will have the wedding some time this year. This is my last word and from it there is no turning."

Rama Rajah did not attempt to combat his mother's decision, though he did venture to make a suggestion. He had promised Lukshmi that he would go with her during his leave upon a special pilgrimage to some temple, nursing a secret hope that faith would have something to do with the fulfilment of the intense desire of the woman. Certainly this was a good opportunity and suitable time. As to the particular temple to be visited he was content to leave the choice to his mother. But it crossed his mind that one of the smaller shrines on the Island of Ramésaram might have been as well for the purpose as the one that necessitated a fatiguing journey through the heat. He said so, but the proposition was negatived at once.

"I asked the swami that very question myself, but the holy man objected, and I did not press the matter further."

"Then we will go to Karlipet."

"He spoke with your wife, my son, and smiled kindly upon her," remarked his mother.

"There was no need for speech between them," rejoined Rama Rajah, somewhat sharply.

"On the contrary," objected his mother; "it was well that he should do so. Her humility and gentle manner went far to atone for the rudeness shown by yourself on the occasion of his visit. It is possible that for her sake he has forgiven the insult put upon him by you."

"What was the guru doing here?" he asked abruptly.

"I have told you already. He was on his way to Jaffna. He crossed five days ago with some pilgrims from Ceylon who were returning. They counted themselves fortunate indeed to travel in such holy company."

CHAPTER XX

A WAYSIDE HALT

BETWEEN eleven o'clock at night and three in the morning there was a hush over the great temple and its worshippers. The yellow oil lamps burned before the image in the shrine and shone forth from the towers like watchful eyes upon the silent night. But the pujaris, the dancing girls, the servers, and the boys and girls belonging to the temple, were wrapped in slumber.

Outside the old pile of buildings the pilgrims camped, eating and sleeping in the soft balmy air, content with what shelter the trees and palms afforded, if no accommodation could be obtained in the rest-houses. The murmur of the sea came in on the breeze, a delicious song of sleep that could be heard now that the merry babbling tongues were quiet. Overhead the melancholy cry of a sea-bird sounded as it winged its flight from one ocean to the other. The moon had risen out of the east where lay the beautiful island of Ceylon, and it touched with its silvery light the sleeping forms of men and cattle, and the glistening fronds of the palms above them.

Between three and four o'clock a cock crew somewhere in the vicinity of the dwellings attached to the temple. The challenge was taken up and answered until the signal had extended from one end of the island to the other. At the sound of the crowing Doraswamy's wife stirred. Before long the rest of the party was awake, and some of them busy preparing the early meal. Jaganath needed no calling. With the first crow of the temple bird he started from his pillow,

and was soon taking his share of the light domestic duties of the morning.

"At dawn the carts will be ready to carry us back," he said, as he handed his cousin a cup of coffee. "We shall cross by the steam launch and be in good time for the morning mail. By to-morrow at noon we shall reach home once more."

"I am not going straight to Tinnevelly," remarked Rama Rajah, as he handed the empty cup to his cousin, and threw himself back upon his pillows.

"Where then does my brother intend to travel if not to Tinnevelly?"

"The big mistress has decreed that I make a pilgrimage to the temple of Karlipet with my wife before returning."

"Then I must pack up sufficient food for our needs on the way, as there are few villages upon the road and no rest-houses. It is said that the water-famine is bad in that part, and that all the cattle are dead and the villagers have run away."

"By all means make the necessary preparations. But I must tell you that it is ordered by the big mistress that I and my wife make the journey by ourselves and without attendants."

Jaganath sat down by his cousin's pillow in sudden consternation.

"Brother, do not go alone," he said in a low earnest voice. "Let me come with you, if it is only that I may cook your food. You have never had to do it for yourself, and you will starve."

Rama Rajah smiled at the anxious face bent over him. "I shall be able to do all that is necessary for myself, and I shall have my wife to help me."

"If you will allow me to come I will ride by the side of the driver, and the temple people shall not discover that any one has accompanied you," pleaded Jaganath, with increasing concern.

"No, no, little brother! Set your mind at rest; I shall take care of myself."

"At least let me wait at the station."

"There can be no objection to that, I imagine. The temple is about sixteen miles from the railway. We shall not be absent more than twenty-four hours."

It was useless to beg for any deviation from this arrangement, and Jaganath had to content himself with superintending the provisioning of the expedition. Into this task he threw all his energies, with the result that the baskets and bundles, destined to be put out as the Assistant Collector's luggage at the wayside station where they were to leave the railway, presented a formidable array.

The dawn lightened, and the loaded carts began the homeward journey. The hoary towers and stately buildings stood in strong relief against the eastern sky. Shafts of shining yellow invaded the grey and shot up behind the dark masonry. The tropical scene unfolded itself to the searching light of the morning sun; the trees dropped their mantle of purple and put on vivid greens, the sand paled into golden tints, and the soft quivering blue haze returned to bathe land and sea in opalescent tints and shimmering lights.

Rama Rajah looked back upon the towers as they sank into the distance. He was conscious of an intense longing to return straight to his own home without undertaking this second expedition. There was nothing in the ceremonies at the great temple to forfeit his respect or to outrage his intelligence. It would be well if the impression made could be retained. When England lay in the throes of darkness and her Druids were worshipping demon gods with sacrifices of blood, Rama was receiving a homage that, compared with the Druidical ceremonial, was as light compared with the blackness of night. A philosophical priesthood ministered a simple ritual far in advance of that in use at Stonehenge. The ritual had been handed down from generation to generation with little variation by a priestly caste. In theory its philosophical purity had been preserved; and from it had been rigidly excluded the demonolatry and blood sacrifices of the Dravidian race. In its simplicity, as a primitive offering of adoration to the Creator and Preserver, the ceremony he

had attended presented nothing in detail to jar against the teaching of the West. If Hinduism could take its stand there, could eliminate from itself the pretentious guru and his pernicious assumptions, the ascetical sanyasi with his magic and witchcraft, the non-Brahmin pujaris of the innumerable village temples who practise degrading rites, a simple archaic religion would be presented to the people. There had been nothing to repel in this visit to Ramésaram, nothing to alienate him from the faith of his fathers.

But the discordant note had been struck by the projected pilgrimage to Karlipet. He thought resentfully of the guru standing in the colonnade apart from the crowd, the sensual human being, who blasphemously posed as a divinity, who counselled this visit to the shrine of a demon, who perverted the simple tenets of an ancient faith, the guru who came between the worshipper and his God. However, the promise had been made and it must be fulfilled. Fortunately it devolved upon his wife to take an active part in the puja ; there would doubtless be a blood sacrifice, with certain rites, which like those of the restitution of his caste would outrage his better feelings and obliterate the higher ideals raised at Ramésaram ; but he would assume the *rôle* of a spectator and stand aside ; for his soul rose in rebellion ; and he hated the man who had instigated it.

The sea-breeze was left behind, and the hot air blew into the carriage windows as the train sped away from the promontory. The glimmering line of silver sea melted into the horizon. The opalescent colours faded from land and sky, and nature assumed a monotonous tint, bleached and pale. The soil was sandy, a desert in dry weather, and a succession of wide tracts of shallow pools in the rains. Palmyra palms, with black stems and small thick crowns of blackish-green, formed the chief vegetation. Here and there might be seen a small patch of thorny scrub, leafless under the drought and affording no shade in that weary land.

The stations were at some distance from each other. They were all of the same pattern in this district and presented a

similar scene, a low bungalow with a tiled roof, a platform of gravel exposed to the glare of the sun, a native porter whose energy seemed to have been burned out of him, and a caste waterman, who with a tin pot and red earthenware chatty went languidly up and down the length of the train, to distribute the precious liquid to the thirsty travellers in the crowded third-class carriages.

Sometime in the early hours of the afternoon they arrived at Karlipet. Rama Rajah and his wife descended with Jagannath, who had constituted himself the custodian of the collection of odd bundles and baskets that contained the commissariat supplies.

The big mistress had had ample time in the ladies' compartment of the carriage to harangue her daughter-in-law as to the way in which she was to behave. She was to recollect that she was the chief supplicant, and everything must be done to concentrate the attention of the deity upon herself. She was to think of nothing but her one great desire; and all her offerings and acts of worship must be performed with that one object alone occupying her mind.

Lukshmi listened with down-cast eyes, and, as was dutiful in a daughter-in-law when her mother spoke, said nothing. Once only she made answer, and that was when the older lady asked a question—

“Are you afraid of going alone with your husband?”

Lukshmi lifted her large, brown eyes to those of the inquirer, and after a slight pause she replied—

“No, I am not afraid. You have bidden me to be obedient in all things. It is sufficient. I will obey.”

Her mother-in-law was satisfied, and though she continued to pour out advice and admonition as long as her son and his wife were within hearing, she was satisfied that they understood their duties. It was with a tranquil mind that she watched them cross the heated strip of gravelled platform and disappear into the shadow of the waiting-room. She was confident that the pilgrimage would bear good results, just as she was assured in her mind that their visit and offerings to the temple at

Ramésaram would mitigate and perhaps avert altogether the curse.

The train moved out of the station to enter another tract of desert, and by-and-by stop at another station, the duplicate of the last. Later on it would leave the sand behind and pass through the long stretches of cotton soil, where the bleached yellow tints would be exchanged for a pale, ashy grey. The same brazen sky arched the heavens from one horizon to the other, the same scorching wind caused by the motion of the train blew in at the windows, the same monotonous level spread on either side unbroken by hill or vale.

Rama Rajah watched the retreating train as it crawled along its iron way like a black caterpillar, bearing its load of humanity till it was but a speck upon the dazzling horizon. Again he was conscious of an instinctive repulsion to the course he was following. This time it took the form of a vague regret that he had allowed the locomotive, with its string of carriages, to leave him stranded in that drought-stricken spot. The long road journey over such a desert was not pleasant to contemplate. His thoughts were dispersed by Jaganath.

"Brother, there are no conveyances to be had in the station yard. I shall have to go to the village and see if I can secure a cart to carry you to the temple."

"In which direction does the temple lie?"

"To the south-west; it is beyond that line of palmyras over there, they tell me."

He pointed to a belt of palms that were distorted by the quivering heat.

"It will be very hot and dusty travelling. And they say here that only country-carts can be obtained, such as are used for conveying corn. Is it not possible to abandon the pilgrimage even now, and send the offering by me? I will present it saying that the journey is not fit for a Hindu lady, delicately nurtured in her home among the green rice-fields. I can pray on her behalf and make the necessary pujah with the pujari."

Jaganath's eyes sought those of his cousin in earnest,

single-hearted anxiety. For the moment the Assistant Collector hesitated.

"I will ask my wife if she feels able to face the journey in a country cart without springs. The decision shall rest with her and not with me. I am accustomed to roughing it in the district and it will not hurt me."

He sought Lukshmi in the waiting-room. She was seated on a bench wrapped in deep thought, apparently unconscious of the heat. He explained the unfavourable conditions under which they would have to travel, and suggested that Jaganath should take the offerings, which formed the most important part of the pilgrimage, and offer up their prayers, asking that the privileges and benefits desired might be granted without their personal attendance.

To his surprise his wife negatived the proposal with animation suspiciously like indignation. She had promised their mother that she would go, that she would plead in person, that she would perform whatever puja the pujari ordained, even if it necessitated a terrible ordeal of blood. Why was there hesitation and delay? She was ready to start this minute. If cattle could not be found in the village, she would go on foot, setting out at sundown and walking during the night. Impetuously the words poured from her lips, her eyes shone with enthusiasm, and Rama Rajah realized that evasion was impossible, and that the unpleasant duty must be performed. He returned to his cousin.

"My wife is eager to be off, and she will not hear of any alteration in our plans," he said, with a sigh of resignation.

"Then I will go at once to the village and secure the best pair of bullocks available."

"Spare no money and choose a cart that is sound. We will eat our food at sundown and travel to-night. The bullocks will rest during the day, and we will start on our return to-morrow night, arriving here in the morning, and departing by the same train that brought us here."

"Let me come with you, brother," pleaded Jaganath.

Rama Rajah looked at him, doubt springing up in his

mind with an increasing desire not to be separated from his devoted server.

"I see no reason why you should not travel as far as the village to which the temple belongs."

"There is no village. The temple stands alone in the midst of a thorn jungle, I am told. If I leave you within half-a-mile of it there can be no harm in my going. No one belonging to the temple will see me or need know that I have come so far."

"So be it, then," replied Rama Rajah, as he turned back into the waiting-room, which had been put at his service by the obliging station-master. No train was expected for some hours and the official was well aware of the fact that he was accommodating the Assistant Collector.

Jaganath departed on his mission without delay. The door of the station bungalow opened upon a road that was undefined by either hedge or ditch. It merely merged into the waste land which was baked as hard as the metalled surface of the road itself. A few palmyras stood on the opposite side affording the scantiest shade possible. Here native passengers, who arrived from a distance—usually some hours before the train was due—encamped, cooking their meals and sleeping under the mop-headed palms for want of a better rest-house. He fixed his turban well over his ears, rolled his muslin cloth about his loins, opened a white cotton umbrella, and started for the village.

It was not more than half a mile distant and consisted of a group of some dozen or so mud huts with thatched roofs. Two or three buffaloes, half a dozen fowls, and some leggy black goats stood about the doors of these habitations. A gaunt yellow dog snarled at the stranger—it was too dispirited to bark—and one of the buffaloes slowly turned a goggle brainless eye upon him, as he looked about in his quest for a conveyance.

The people of the village made their living chiefly by serving the railway in some way. They sold sweets, fruit, and milk to the travellers who passed up and down the line, being

permitted to vend their wares on the platform. They supplied the station with watchman, signalman, and porter, and occasionally a cooly or two for mending the line when ordinary spade work was needed. Some of the villagers were cultivators. In favourable seasons they sowed and reaped an indifferent crop under "dry cultivation" off the sandy soil that surrounded the village. In time of drought they were glad to do cooly work for the railway, and receive a small wage with which they bought grain to feed themselves and their beasts. But there was none too much for the hungry mouths, and hunger was more often than not their lot. Grain of all kinds was dear, and longing eyes frequently followed the trucks of fat rice bags that passed along the line without dropping any of their treasures at the little wayside station.

Water they had in moderation from the railway well, from which a strong pumping engine drew the life-giving treasure. In this matter the villagers counted themselves more fortunate than their distant neighbours, whose shallow tanks and wells had with very few exceptions run dry.

The only green object to be seen was a gourd that grew over a rough trellis upon the end of a house belonging to one of the cultivators. By dint of rationing his family on the supply allowed by the railway, he managed to water his precious vine. The long snake-like fruit was eagerly bought by the station-master and his servants for curry, and the proceeds helped in the purchase of rice. The vivid green of the foliage attracted Jaganath, and he presented himself at the door of the house with a request for a cart and a pair of bulls.

The man gazed at him doubtfully. His cattle were weak from want of green food and straw. It was some time since they had made a long journey. What if one of them dropped down upon the road and died? The name of the Assistant Collector was mentioned and the objections melted away. Of course if any ill befel the cattle the gentleman would make good the loss. After some haggling the terms were arranged. The owner's son, a spare undersized lad of twelve, was to drive. Oh! yes, he knew the way; he had taken pilgrims to

the temple of the god of barren women before, but not of late. No one cared to travel in the drought. It was well that the lady should go there to do pujah ; the result could not fail.

Jaganath returned to the station to make a fire under the palmyras, and prepare a good meal for the travellers before they set out. He procured some fresh milk from the village, brewed some coffee, which he bottled, wrapped the bread in a fresh leaf plucked from the gourd vine, and did all he could to ensure the comfort of his cousin.

Supper was over, the cart was loaded with the baskets which were placed in front ; the back part was left free, and its narrow flat bottom was covered with cushions borrowed from the station-master. Jaganath intimated that all was ready for their start, and then disappeared.

Rama Rajah helped his wife into the vehicle with its primitive hood of split bamboo and palm-leaf, arranging the pillows to her liking, taking, for a Hindu husband, unusual pains to ensure her comfort. He then seated himself and bade the driver proceed. After some erratic movements on the part of the cattle in their endeavours to return to their homestead instead of following the road, they started, and crossing the line plodded away into the darkness.

Under the cart just beneath the driver swung an oil lantern that served to light the way. There was no fear of meeting any other vehicles ; they had the road to themselves, and in the brilliant tropical starlight it was easy to see it and keep in the centre. Even if the bulls had desired to make a digression, they might do so in perfect safety except for the useless expense of their limited strength. In a short time the moon would rise and whiten the dreary landscape with ghostly light when the way would be quite plain.

The cattle moved slowly, and their youthful driver, mindful of the family property, was merciful and considerate. The cart progressed at the rate of about two and a half miles an hour. Lukshmi composed herself for sleep and prepared to make the best of it until dawn, when they would reach their destination. She was just dropping off when she felt the cart

jolt forward and alter in its balance. She raised her head and looked out over the pile of parcels lying beyond her pillow. Against the starlit sky she could distinguish a form by the side of the lad. Touching her husband on the shoulder she said—

“Some one is sitting by the driver; who is it?”

“It is Jaganath,” replied Rama Rajah.

“Jaganath!” she repeated sharply, drawing herself upright upon her cushions.

“Yes, it is all right. He is coming with us part of the way.”

“Your mother gave strict orders that we were not to take him with us.”

“She did not understand the difficulty and discomfort——”

Lukshmi leaned forward, and reaching out her arm smote the unwelcome fellow-traveller sharply on the back.

“You were ordered by the big mistress not to come. How dare you disobey her command? Get off at once and go back to the station.”

At the sound of the lady's voice the lad stopped the animals. But Jaganath refused to dismount at her order.

“Husband, tell him that it is strictly forbidden that any one except the driver of this cart should accompany us.”

“Who has forbidden it except our mother?”

“The swami forbade it. I spoke with him a few minutes at the temple, and he warned me that all our efforts would be useless if we neglected to carry out a single detail. Tell Jaganath to return, I pray you. If any one had come with us it should have been our mother. But a meddlesome, unmarried youth like your cousin can only anger the god by his presence,” she concluded spitefully.

Still Rama Rajah hesitated, and Jaganath waited for the word of dismissal from his cousin's lips.

“If you do not send him back, I will return to the station by myself, and you may proceed on your journey alone and without me. What! Would you offend the temple god and the pujari by disregarding their holy wishes as you angered the

guru? He cursed you, but the temple swami may kill you in his wrath if you disobey, and we could only say that he had done nothing more than what was right."

"You had better return to the station and await us there," said Rama Rajah, as she ended her vixenish tirade. "I shall come back without fail—without fail," he repeated, "at dawn the day after to-morrow."

"What if the bulls are over tired and need more rest?" asked Jaganath, with anxiety.

"Then, I shall walk, my wife accompanying me, or remaining with the driver until I can return with another conveyance. There is ample food provided, you told me."

"Enough for three or four days if need be. But the water-pot will need replenishing at the temple well before starting on the homeward journey."

Very unwillingly Jaganath descended from his perch by the driver. The cattle were started once more on their journey, and the cart rumbled slowly away. He stood in the warm soft sand of the road, watching it until it disappeared into the darkness, its swaying lantern glimmering faintly some time after he had lost sight of the arched cover against the sky, and ceased to hear the creaking wheels. Then, turning with mortified disappointment, he walked back to the station, and begged the caste waterman to permit him to spread his sleeping mat under the eves of his hut near the water-tank of the railway.

CHAPTER XXI

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

THE wind had dropped entirely. The tripping feet of the cattle and the large grinding wheels of the cart raised a column of dust, which rolled upwards in the faint light of the lamp like a cloud of smoke. The toiling animals snorted and breathed deeply as they pursued their journey ; the lad dozed behind his charges, too sleepy to keep up his incessant urging and abuse. There was little danger of losing the way.

In the broad plains of India there are no by-roads and cross-cuts with over-hanging trees, and fences of roses and honey-suckle, no undulating hills and dales with pond and ditch and primrose banks. The unfenced thoroughfare runs in a long unbroken line towards the point of the compass in which the village or temple lies. It may bend a little to the right or the left, but its direction is apparent, and none but the blind can mistake it. Where the irrigated rice-fields rejoice the eye, the feature of every highroad is the avenue of noble trees that mark the course for miles and miles. But in these sandy wastes no shade tree can be persuaded to grow, and the roads are inhospitably bare. In sheer desperation the traveller presses forward to his destination, dreading lest he should be compelled to stay by the dreary wayside.

Lukshmi slept with the soundness of tired youth, but her husband was not so fortunate. Taught by Dolores to consider the comfort of others, he gave his wife room to extend herself at full length at the expense of his own convenience. She readily accepted the sacrifice, indifferent to the fact that it obliged him to sit up all night, obtaining what rest he could against the rough sides of the arched cover of the cart.

Dawn had not yet shown itself when the tired cattle came to a standstill. The dozing lad awoke and attempted to start them on again. But they refused to move, and one of them clinched the matter by lying down in the middle of the road. The movement upset the equilibrium of the cart, and Lukshmi opened her eyes in alarm to find her feet higher than her head.

Rama Rajah jumped down and assisted her to alight. He looked at his watch. It was five o'clock. In another twenty or thirty minutes the sky would lighten with signs of the rising sun.

"I cannot go any further; the cattle are tired out," said the lad, gazing at Rama Rajah with the apathetic resignation of his race.

"How far is the temple?"

"Not more than two miles. When the sun comes above the palmyras it is easily seen. By ten o'clock the bulls may be sufficiently rested to finish their journey."

Rama Rajah lifted out the baskets containing the food prepared by Jaganath, and the lad quickly made a fire. The moon had not yet set, and by its light it was possible to unpack the simple morning meal. The eastern sky was grey with the dawn when they had finished their picnic breakfast. They repacked the baskets, and Rama Rajah placed them in the cart.

The landscape stretched away in a dead level on all sides of them, broken only by the ubiquitous palmyra that no drought nor heat seems able to annihilate. The boy pointed out a patch of thorn jungle in the distance, out of which rose the brown tower of a temple. Here and there the mop head of a palm showed above the stunted trees. The grove was of the same bleached greyish-yellow tint as the soil, and there was not a green leaf to be seen, the scorching sun having withered the foliage to dry tinder months ago. The prospect was not inviting, and Lukshmi looked round her with disgust.

"Cannot the cattle take us any further?" she asked in a discontented tone.

"They are tired out and must rest," replied her husband.

"It is impossible to induce a bullock to rise when it lies down on the road as that one has done. See, the other is following its example."

She turned angrily upon the boy. "Here, you stupid child! Make your bullocks get up. You agreed to take us to the temple. This is not the temple, and you will receive no present unless you carry us there."

"Lady, the animals are dead beat with the heat and dust, and they are in poor condition. I cannot make them move until they are rested."

"Beat them. Prick them with your goad. Light a fire underneath the obstinate creatures. It is nothing but laziness on their part and yours."

Her angry tones frightened the boy, and tears filled his tired eyes as he answered in some indignation—

"I cannot hurt my father's cattle. They are his living, his support. When the rain comes by-and-by he will need their assistance to plant his seed. Would you kill them?" He turned to Rama Rajah for the sympathy denied him by the impatient lady. "Sir, the beasts must have rest, and I must beg a little water from the temple well for them or they will die."

"Let them rest as long as is necessary," replied Rama Rajah, kindly. "We will walk on to the temple before the sun rises, and you can follow, bringing our baskets in the cart in time for our midday meal."

"Yes, yes, sir," cried the boy, eagerly. "By noon I can reach the temple, and after another rest we may start to-night on the return journey. They will run back to their home more willingly than they have travelled from it."

Rama Rajah looked at his wife. "You can easily walk that distance. The temple is within sight, and we shall be there by half-past six."

"I would rather have ridden," she replied ungraciously. "You allow yourself to be imposed upon, and so I am obliged to walk, whether I like it or no. However, it will be better than waiting here."

That was perfectly true. There was no shade whatever by the roadside, and in a single hour's time the heat and glare would be insufferable to one who had been accustomed to a good house and every luxury that a Hindu lady could desire.

They started off immediately, the rising sun behind them and the pale moon floating in the west above the little temple. To Rama Rajah, the walk was a pleasant change after his cramped position in the cart. Although there was no dew the morning air had a freshness in it that was exhilarating, and he felt in better humour with the expedition than when he left the train.

They reached the jungle in which the temple was buried. Far and near there was no sign of habitation nor of cultivation. The scene presented a striking contrast to the one they had recently left on the island, in the magic southern sea. The temple itself was a small insignificant building, with a single squat tower of ugly outline and ignoble proportions. Its ornamentation was of the rudest barbaric design, obscene in delineation, and executed in rough burnt clay. Its whole appearance breathed a spirit of demon worship, with blood sacrifices and a degraded ritual, abhorrent to the refined instincts of a high caste, educated Hindu. Rama Rajah caught himself wondering again for the twentieth time why his mother had fixed upon this particular spot as the object of their pilgrimage, when others might have been found, and what attraction it offered to his wife. That it possessed some attraction he could not but observe, as she set the pace at which they moved towards their goal, and exhibited impatience at the slightest delay.

They entered the jungle by a path but little trodden. Thorns appeared to be the marked feature of the vegetation. The ill-shapen trees, bare of leaves, bristled with spines. Their scrubby branches grew at right angles, and spread themselves out like the grey bones of skeleton hands. Between the branches were the dusty remains of the webs of hairy caterpillars, that had devoured the fine acacia-like foliage almost as soon as it had appeared. Grey and straw-coloured

insects, bleached to the same uniform tint as the trunks of the trees and the soil, crawled out of the crevices where they had sheltered for the night, and sunned themselves in the rays that were never too fierce for their liking.

The little uneven path was also beset with thorns and hostile spiky remnants of the plants that rapidly sprang into existence when the showers came, and were as quickly shrivelled by the hot winds. Over-head the sun was already beginning to assume its brassy hue, giving promise of another day of blasting heat. The whole locality was suggestive of evil spirits, of cruelty and wickedness. There was not a single feature to redeem it from its inimical antagonism to all that was tender and vital in nature.

They advanced towards the entrance of the temple, seeing no signs of living creature about the place except the lizards and insects. Rama Rajah was beginning to wonder if the guardian of the shrine had been seared and destroyed with the rest of the vegetation, when an old man appeared at the door. He had a long white beard, and he peered out into the morning sunlight like a disturbed bat. His small black eyes were shaded by bushy eye-brows as white as his beard. Though he had escaped destruction, the curse of the drought seemed to have fallen upon his ancient figure, and to have robbed his wrinkled parchment skin of its warm brown tints, just as it had robbed the scenery of all its colour. In his bony hand he held a staff by which he supported himself. His body, with its uncanny greyish complexion, might have been petrified from its appearance. The only part of him that lived were his eyes, and they shone with the needle points of light that may be seen in the eyes of a scaly snake.

Rama Rajah had met old pujaris of a similar mould before, but never one that quite equalled this ancient man with his shrivelled, dried-up figure. In the district, as Assistant Collector, he had been accustomed to treat them all with contemptuous tolerance. They were necessary for the satisfaction of the stupid ignorant villagers. He did not ascribe to them any supernatural powers, though he knew that they were

capable of performing many marvellous tricks by which they imposed upon the people. It had never entered his mind that he should make use of one of them, and when he proposed to undertake a pilgrimage with his wife, he had something very different in his mind. As he glanced at the man a sense of humiliation overpowered him, and he was conscious of a feeling of shame at finding himself there.

Lukshmi was troubled by no such sensation. The sight of the old pujari filled her superstitious soul with awe. He was to be the medium between themselves and the demon deity of the temple. In the name of the swami he could promise them the gift for which her heart craved. She did not doubt his power for a moment. If he would vouchsafe to bid her hope, it would be sufficient. The guru had assured her of this during their chance meeting at Ramésaram.

As they mounted the crumbling brick steps before the shrine, the pujari stepped over the threshold and advanced to meet them. Rama Rajah explained what had happened and why they had arrived on foot. Also the reason of their visit was set forth. The other listened without making any comment, but when the offering, chiefly gold and silver, was described, the black deepset eyes glittered with greed.

He led them into a hall murky and airless, spread a mat, and bade them be seated. The only opening to the light was the door by which they had entered. Facing this door was an upright stone upon which was carved two cobras intertwined. It was fixed upon an elevated platform, and hid another door leading into the inner shrine. Within this inner chamber was the rude image of the god, one of the innumerable minor deities of South India, whose help Lukshmi was desirous of evoking. At the back of the shrine were three or four small rooms where the pujari and his assistant resided, and a well which still continued to yield a limited supply of water, a virtue ascribed to the miraculous power of the presiding deity.

The hours crept on wearily for Rama Rajah. The various pujahs that took place at intervals during the day only served to increase his disgust. There was the blood sacrifice when a

black goat, purchased of the pujari himself, was killed with much sprinkling of the crimson fluid. Rama Rajah stood aside, an unwilling spectator rather than a partaker in the ceremony, as the goat was decapitated by the assistant with one swing of the two-handled sword. The bleeding head of the animal with glazing eye and lolling tongue was carried inside the dark shrine and laid before the image. It was a particularly ugly and repulsive idol, brutish in its expression, with thick lips, canine teeth, and heavy-lidded sensual eyes. An oil lamp on each side only partially illuminated it, which increased rather than veiled its repulsiveness.

Besides the goat, other offerings were presented, camphor, ghee, sugar, rice, and fruit, all of which were purchased like the goat at a high price from the pujari. The old man burned the incense and chanted many muntras, whilst the suppliant woman prostrated herself again and again.

The day wore away. Rama Rajah was relieved to find that the cattle had arrived under the boy's care, and gave promise of being able to perform the return journey that night. Supper from the well-stocked baskets was taken at sunset; and after supper a final visit was to be paid to the inner shrine, when Lukshmi was to present her last and most valuable offering, the money and jewels which they had brought with them and which constituted by far the most substantial gift of all.

At the beat of tomtom and temple gong Lukshmi, trembling with excitement, once more entered the shrine, bearing her offering in her hands. Her husband followed her, his whole soul in open revolt. Nothing but his desire to please her, and if possible to satisfy the craving of her heart, kept him faithful to the programme arranged by the pujari. Each succeeding ceremony seemed more disgusting than the last. The contrast between the decrepit ministrant of the loathsome blood sacrifice and the philosophical Brahmins who performed Rama's worship, struck him with renewed force. The religious service at the great temple, though primitive and simple, had nothing degrading in its ritual like this mummery,

He longed for its termination, and found himself obliged to summon to his aid that patience and self-effacement taught by Dolores to enable him to complete what he had undertaken.

To Lukshmi the long hot day sped quickly and eventfully. She brought to the temple a faith that never wavered. To her credulous eyes the mysterious image, dimly lighted by its flickering lamps, seemed to listen to her prayer as the pujari chanted his verses, and as he tossed the brass tray containing the burning incense towards the large nostrils of the idol. Her eyes glittered as they were lifted to the sensual face above her, and Rama Rajah, catching their expression, wondered again how she could believe and hope.

This time there was a slight alteration in the arrangement of the platform. The lamps had been pushed back, the head of the animal, with the rest of the offerings, had been taken away—accepted and eaten, the pujari would have declared had he been questioned—and the platform was bare. The light fell only upon the spot where the last offering was to be placed, but the figure itself was shrouded in darkness. Out of that darkness gleamed two points of pale light, two shining eyes that seemed focussed upon the worshippers. A contemptuous smile curled the lips of the Assistant Collector as he noted the effect, and thought of the use to which phosphorous might be put. The attempt to produce a supernatural appearance was merely a continuation of the childish exhibition that had been going on during the whole day, and he congratulated himself that this was the last and concluding ceremony.

The pujari came forward to receive the gift, his black eyes sparkling with a greedy light at the display of gold and silver. Having presented the small tray with the offering and laid it upon the platform, he took Lukshmi's hand and bade her look up. A shudder ran through her as she obeyed him. To her excited imagination the terrible eyes were filled with a living light. Behind them she saw the personality of the demon of the temple who had favoured her prayer, and was manifesting himself as a sign that he would grant her petition.

"He calls! The swami calls his worshippers to him! Come! Come!" cried the old man, drawing Lukshmi forward.

She made no resistance, but submitted, childlike, to be led whither he would take her. Rama Rajah, wondering what other piece of extravagant folly was about to be performed, followed reluctantly. They passed at the back of the image and found themselves facing a closed door, from behind which came the sound of a tomtom. Rama Rajah hung back with the intention of refusing to join in any more pujah, but Lukshmi waited with an intense eagerness that puzzled her husband. The pujari struck the door with his hand.

"Swami! swami! Your humble slave awaits your pleasure," he cried, in hoarse quavering tones.

The door was flung back. A flood of light dazzled their eyes and Rama Rajah was held motionless by the sight of an unexpected figure.

In the centre of the room stood the guru, his hand raised—was it to bless or to curse?—his body marked with sacred ashes, and his eyes aflame with unholy passion.

Lukshmi gave a little cry and started forward, falling at the feet of the guru with the eightfold salutation.

"Swami, I am here, your humble slave," she cried in a voice half suffocated with emotion.

But the guru seemed not to hear her. Across her prostrate form his eyes met those of her husband. Was it fancy or did Rama Rajah detect in their gleam triumph and revenge? With a flash of angry resentment he darted forward to cross the threshold and stand by his wife; but at that moment two men stepped out of the shadow of the shrine. Seizing him roughly by the arms they drew him back, whilst the door was closed, shutting off the light and separating him from his wife. In furious rage he struggled to free himself, but it was useless. A sheet was quickly thrown over his head and wound about his arms. He felt himself lifted from his feet and carried

away, his protesting cries stifled by a strong hand that closed over his mouth with an iron grip. An unknown voice sounded in his ear—

“The man is yet unborn who may stand against the wrath of the gods.”

CHAPTER XXII

A HOT MARCH

JAGANATH was disturbed in his mind by the frustration of his little design. In spite of the big mistress's prohibition, he had fully resolved to accompany his cousin the greater part of the way. He was quite willing to have remained somewhere on the road in the vicinity of the temple, and he had no curiosity concerning the business that took the Assistant Collector and his wife there. He would have been content to have remained with the bullock-cart, and to have confined his attentions entirely to looking after the creature comforts of the pilgrims. The enforced idleness of two nights and a day at the station was most distasteful, and he anathematized his cousin's wife, calling her a little devil, and prophesying an evil fate for her.

But for all his annoyance he slept soundly, untroubled by the heat. The night mails, up and down, thundered into the station at different times, making a short stay. They were followed by rumbling, creeping, goods trains. But of these he took no heed, scarcely hearing their screaming whistles and the hiss of escaping steam. It was only at dawn, when a few starved crows cawed out their misery upon the roof of the station bungalow, that he roused himself and opened his eyes. He yawned at the prospect before him, and would have been glad to have gone back to the land of dreams. But the waterman came for a chat, and invited him to make use of his fire for the preparation of his morning meal.

The sun rose out of the great flat horizon, gathering strength with each degree it surmounted. The little hamlet

near the station awoke to its duties with the same lethargy that had marked it yesterday and would mark it on the morrow. The goats and buffaloes were milked. The voracious fowls gobbled the meagre handfuls of grain thrown grudgingly to them. The children belonging to the inhabitants drank the rice water of the evening before, and received their portion of rice cakes, which served rather to whet their appetites than to satisfy them.

Jaganath had reserved a basket of food for his own use. He was therefore independent of the waterman. It passed the time to make a fire and cook himself a midday meal. The shy, naked little ones of the village, who had dined almost as sparingly as they had breakfasted, strolled up to the station to see the fire-carriages pass through, and to pick up scraps of fruit and bread thrown from the train. Upon them he bestowed the remnants of his repast, which they ate voraciously. They were of the Shanar caste, the toddy-drawers of the district, when there was juice to draw from the palmyras. A couple of yellow dogs greedily devoured any scraps rejected by the children, and after them came the crows, audacious in their desperate need, and ready to snatch the food from any unwary hand that did not guard its treasure.

The up-train glided in, bringing noise and bustle. On the following day it would take away the pilgrims from Karlipet, and carry them back to their home in Tinnevelly. At the familiar sound of the guard's whistle the great engine resumed its panting, and the train proceeded on its journey northward, disappearing into the heat haze of the level horizon with a line of white smoke.

Later the downward mail arrived, bringing another crowd of pilgrims, packed in third-class carriages, hot, dusty, weary, full of eager anticipation, ready to endure uncomplainingly any trial and discomfort the journey might offer, so that the goal was reached, and forgiveness obtained from the great god Rama. At a wave of the green flag and shrill blast of the whistle, that train also passed on its journey towards the limpid waters of the Southern oceans, and the station sank

back into its normal torpid condition. Jaganath sat half asleep under the sheltering verandah of the platform, dozing the hours away, or gossiping with the waterman.

The sun went down in a flame-coloured glory as though it endeavoured to compensate nature for the white heat of the day by adorning it in gorgeous tints. Once more Jaganath sought his pillow, happy in the thought that before daylight he would see his cousin again, if the cattle did not fail.

How long he had been asleep he did not know. He was dimly conscious that the mails had gone through north and south, and that there was no sign of coming dawn. Suddenly he awoke from a most uncomfortable dream that seemed to fill his whole being with one single impression. Rama Rajah had called him, and had uttered his name in sharp, agonized accents.

He sat up, trembling, and listened. There was not a sound in the still night air. Even the jackal's voice was hushed by the finger of famine, and the night owls had taken their flight to a less afflicted district. Overhead the stars twinkled with the scintillation of a frosty night, and the waning moon sloped westwards. By her position he concluded that dawn was not far off. At any moment the cart might arrive, bringing the returning pilgrims.

He rose and went out into the road crossing the line, and peered through the darkness for the glimmer of the cart's lantern; but not a sign of it was visible. Returning to the booking-office, he gazed up at the white face of the clock and thought that he could distinguish the hands at the hour of four. It was too early to light a fire, and until there was some sign of the advent of the cart, it was useless to prepare any refreshment for the travellers. He propped himself up against the outside wall of the station at the end of the platform, from which point he had a view of the road by which they must come. With his eyes upon the monotonous darkness, ever watchful for the faint light of an approaching lantern, and his ears open ready to catch the creak of wheels and the tramp of the cloven hoofs upon the metalled roads, he

kept vigil until the sky lightened with the dawn and the landscape unveiled itself.

The long line of road lying like a ribbon across the desert track grew more distinct, until it disclosed its monotonous length for at least three miles. Jaganath searched it with sharp eyes that could not have failed to have detected the presence of any travellers, pedestrian or otherwise. But he could distinguish nothing living or moving. The increasing light made it less of a task to the straining vision, and when at length the sun peeped over the black heads of the palmyras on the horizon, the emptiness of the way was manifest. He looked for a telltale column of dust, shining like golden smoke in the far distance, but there was none.

Disappointed he turned his attention to his own needs, once more building a fire of wood begged from the waterman. The supply of food in the basket had held out well, and there was sufficient left to provide a good meal for the travellers as soon as they arrived. He bought some fresh milk and butter at the village from the owner of the buffaloes, and having breakfasted himself, he crossed the line and sat down by the side of the road to continue his watch. Seven, eight, nine o'clock passed, and there was no sign of their coming. The continuous gazing into the glaring atmosphere caused his eyes to smart, and he was glad to seek the shadow of the bungalow wall. As he resumed the position of the early morning at the end of the platform, he tried to recall the dream that had disturbed his sleep. It was confused and indistinct, and the fleeting shadows that moved in it were illusive. Nothing was tangible but the sound of the well-known voice, pure and musical in its tone, like a tenor bell. Not in gentle speech did it speak, but with a ring of acute agony and distress. As he thought it over a growing conviction seized his mind that it was a call for assistance, a summons for help.

Ten, eleven o'clock struck, but there was no indication of their approach. The mail train by which they had arrived two days ago, and which Jaganath confidently hoped would pick

them up and carry them homewards, was due between one and two o'clock. He began to be anxious lest they should not be in time to eat before they started on their rail journey. Up to the present time not a soul had come from the direction of the temple. At length, in the far distance he distinguished a cloud of dust upon the horizon. He watched it eagerly to mark its character. Was it caused by the wheels of a cart or was it only a devil's chariot, one of those curious columns raised by vagabond whirlwinds that waltz over the desert land in eccentric paths? The cloud proved steady in its course, and the waterman, whom he consulted, asserted that it undoubtedly betokened the advent of a cart drawn by bullocks.

A sudden load of care slipped off the watcher's heart, and he set about his preparations with pleasant haste, although the waterman assured him that the cart was at least four miles away, and that with the best pair of village bulls—accustomed to agricultural labour—it could not reach the station under an hour; it would be more likely an hour and a quarter. This would bring them in good time for their train, though there would be only a small margin to permit of the consumption of the food he was preparing. For a couple of copper coins he had been allowed to cut one of the green snake gourds that grew on the wall of the mud hut, and with other condiments, bought of the waterman, he passed an hour pleasantly enough in the cooking of a savoury curry such as he knew his cousin loved.

The column of dust slowly drew near until the cart and the toiling cattle were clearly distinguishable. When it was within a hundred and fifty yards, he hurried towards it with shouts to the driver to push on more quickly. The man stared at him with astonishment, whilst the shaven head of a money-lender was protruded from the opening in front demanding why there was need of haste; was the train in view?

Struck dumb with dismay Jaganath made no reply. The driver of the cart he had hired for his cousin was a lad. This man was old and grey. As the vehicle drew up at the entrance

of the station, the money-lender and his clerk leisurely climbed down, dragging out their luggage after them. It consisted of a strong box, a roll of sleeping mats and pillows, and two or three bundles containing food and drinking vessels. An empty water-bottle and a shout for the waterman indicated that the travellers had passed through a drought-stricken country. They had been on a round of oppression, purposely choosing a time when their wretched clients would be at their mercy. The famine had robbed the people of their food, and the money-lender deprived them of their cattle and the few possessions remaining to them.

Jaganath questioned the driver closely. Had he come from the direction of the temple of Karlipet? Yes; he had passed the jungle in which it was situated. Had he seen any travellers upon the road? None; they had not encountered any one. But had he not overtaken a country cart like his own, with a lad for its driver, or observed one waiting near the temple? No; the jungle in which the temple stood might have sheltered such a cart, but he had not noticed one.

“Are you sure that you have seen no bullock bandy upon the road?” demanded Jaganath again, with a perseverance that set the old man pondering.

There was a cart that passed him in the early dawn on the other side of the temple, but it was going in the opposite direction, and it was three or four miles beyond the temple.

“Who was in the bandy?”

“How can I tell? The sun was not up, and the dust flew in clouds smothering everything, like the white smoke from the fire carriage on the iron road. If the travellers went to the temple, doubtless they are still there, and will return in time for the night mail if they miss the day train.”

The man, having received his fare, drove away to seek twelve hours' rest with one of the villagers, and Jaganath, after a fruitless examination of the horizon, retired disconsolately to his camp fire. The curry seethed in its yellow oiled butter, and sent up a savoury smell that reminded the maker of it, that he

was himself hungry and ready for the midday repast, but he decided to wait for his cousin.

Another hour passed. The puffing, panting engine brought its load of passengers, and in due course moved away, carrying the extortioner and his assistant to other scenes of oppression. Jaganath watched its departure and gazed after it in deep perplexity. There was nothing to be done but to wait in patience for another twelve hours. The next train by which they could leave, was the night mail that arrived between one and two in the morning. Scrutinizing the length of the road once more he sought his curry pots. It was past the usual time for his dinner, and the food was very welcome.

Usually after the midday meal the Hindu takes a nap. With this intention Jaganath lay down in a retired spot near the hut of the waterman. But whether the hour had passed for sleep or whether there was an undercurrent of anxiety in his mind that kept him awake, the fact remained that he wooed slumber in vain. No sooner did he close his eyes than the memory of the confused dream of the morning recurred, and again the voice of his cousin rang in his ears. What did it mean? Could Rama Rajah be in any danger? Absurd and foolish thought! What harm could come to him unless he had fallen into the hands of dacoits? There was no one to hurt him, to wish him evil, no one but his spoilt wife, and what mischief could she work? He rose to his feet and walked to the house of the man of whom he had hired the cart.

“Your son has not returned,” he remarked.

“He will come when the 'Sistant Collector gives the order to return.”

“You do not fear any evil?”

The man laughed.

“My son knows how to take care of himself and the cattle. The 'Sistant Collector knows still better how to take care of himself and his wife. What harm can come? All my life I have seen pilgrims passing to and from the temple in the jungle—sometimes women and children, sometimes women without

men—and do they not all return safely sooner or later to the iron way, and depart in the fire-carriage?"

Again he laughed, and Jaganath felt ashamed of his fears. Yet for all that he could not allay his uneasiness. He went back to the waterman.

"My big brother is late; I will go and meet him. See that my basket is not touched."

"It will be safe by my hut," replied the man. "Will you not take some food with you?"

"There is plenty with the cart, and it is not necessary to burden myself."

Having come to this determination Jaganath lost no time in carrying it into execution. It was half-past two when he set off at an easy pace upon the heated highway towards the temple in the jungle. What he intended doing he did not trouble himself to think; he felt so sure that he would encounter the cart somewhere between the temple and the station; and mounting beside the driver he would ride back.

The sun had passed its zenith, but it still bore down upon the parched earth with fierce heat. The air quivered with curious distorting effect upon the landscape, magnifying small objects out of all due proportion, and creating weird appearances that were put down by the natives to the direct work of the demons. The surface of the road was so hot to the touch that he needed his sandals to protect his feet from being blistered. The way was slightly raised, and here and there a line of palmyras marked its course. On either side the land stretched away in a dead level, the soil dried and caked, and radiating the intense heat like a burnished sheet of metal. No sign of bird-life animated the scene, nor was there an animal, wild or domestic, in view. It was a desolate expanse unrelieved by any living creature except lizards, and these sat sunning themselves upon small boulders, and the trunks of the palmyras with staring eyes, and motionless, scaly bodies that suggested some hideous nightmare.

As Jaganath planted each foot upon the ground a little puff of colourless dust flew upwards in a curling cloud. The air

that he set in motion by his forward movement carried the cloud with him. It reached his nostrils and parched his throat. Still with raised umbrella, and his loins well girded in folds of white muslin, he plodded on through the heat and glare, a watchful eye upon the distance, led by the call of his waking dream.

He had walked barely an hour when he began to feel the pangs of thirst, and he remembered with regret that he had brought nothing to eat and drink. He blamed himself for his folly, and for refusing to take the advice of the waterman. His thirst was kept ever before his mind by the sight of the mirage that floated on the horizon with its delusive vision of cool stretches of smooth water. Those deceptive visions he knew were the work of the mischievous spirits that rode in the whirling columns of sand that swept over the plain.

Four and five o'clock came, and the alluring tanks, pictured in the distance, and ever retreating before his steps, faded away, leaving the dull, grey horizon in an unbroken line of dreary length, peculiarly depressing to look at after the mirage had disappeared. By this time he reckoned that he must have gone seven or eight miles, his pace having been slow. He glanced back. The station bungalow was lost to view, and there was not a single human habitation visible in any direction. He seemed to be in the centre of some desert, where, though walking perpetually, he was doomed never to progress. The monotonous scenery remained unchanged with his advancement despite all his efforts, and he had the sensation of being bewitched.

The thirst that had come over him from breathing the hot dusty air increased, and his eye wandered round continually in search of some welcome column of smoke, indicating the presence of a wood fire made to cook an evening meal. Where there was a human habitation with occupants, there would be a well of water somewhere near. But his search was in vain.

The sun was still an hour from its setting, its rays glowing fiercely and unrelentingly, when he descried a little knot of people tramping through the hot dust towards him. He scanned

the party eagerly, hoping to recognize Rama Rajah. But as they drew near he saw that they were villagers, men, women, and children, with two or three gaunt pariah dogs. Want was written on their dejected countenances and their lean bodies; and suffering showed its presence in their dispirited attitude. When he came up with them he stopped.

"Is there a tank or well within reach?" he asked. "I have walked far and am thirsty."

They all bore a burden of some kind, a bundle, or basket, or a pile of cooking vessels. The oldest man of the party carried an earthen pot upon his head. Its dewy surface showed that it contained water and the evaporation that went on in the heat of the sun cooled the liquid to a refreshing degree. Jaganath's eyes were irresistibly drawn to the chatty with unconscious desire written in them as he put his question. The bearer of the precious burden replied that there was no well between the temple in the jungle and the iron road.

"You are Shanars," said Jaganath.

"Yes, we are toddy-drawers, but there is no work for us now."

The old man lowered the pot and set it upon the ground to take advantage of the stoppage and ease himself of its weight. The water gurgled against the sides of the vessel with a pleasant liquid sound that maddened the thirsty traveller.

"Where is your village?" he asked.

Though he might not drink water from the chatty of a Shanar, he could draw for himself from the Shanar's well. The other explained that it was far away on the other side of the temple. Why were they moving? Had the water of their well failed? No, there was still a little at the bottom which might, with care, have lasted until the rains came, if the sowcar (money-lender) had not paid them his periodical visit to demand the interest upon the sum advanced for the last wedding. With the failure of the monsoon there was nothing wherewith to make payment, so he had driven off their half-starved buffaloes and goats and sold them at some distant village. Not content with this he had forcibly taken the silver

ornaments of the women—here the female members of the party began to weep—and there was nothing to be done in the face of poverty and starvation but to lock up their empty houses, as others had done before them, and “run away.”

Jaganath asked where they were going. They said that they intended to beg for food at the station, and after resting they would follow the great road to the north, in the hope of reaching a district where the famine pressed less severely. They had been told that the rice harvest had been reaped near Madura. Yes, that was so, answered Jaganath. He gave them a few coppers which they received with grunts of satisfaction and again his eyes sought the tempting water-pot.

The Shanar read his need in his face, but being of the lower caste he did not dare to offer a drink. The mere fact that the boon had not been craved indicated that the stranger was of a higher caste. The burning of his throat and mouth seemed increased by the sight of the water, but to accept a draught from the vessel of the lower caste was impossible. The thought of it was curiously abhorrent to the caste man—incomprehensibly so to a European. Jaganath believed implicitly that it would be pollution to touch the liquid with his lips, and he revolted from the thought of such a thing, as an Englishman would revolt at the thought of having to drink from a polluted drain. Jaganath’s common sense had not been fostered in a foreign country at the expense of his inherited instincts. His prejudice rose in full strength, and his dried lips uttered the fatal words, “Pass on your way,” as he resumed his march.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FULFILMENT OF THE CURSE

WHEN Jaganath met the forlorn little party of ruined Shanars, he calculated that he had accomplished half the distance to the temple. As they proceeded on their way he hesitated, and considered whether he should return to the railway where he would find food and drink, companionship and light, or whether he should press on through the coming darkness and persevere in his attempt to find his cousin. The thought of having to spend another twenty-four hours in disturbing anxiety at the station, haunted by his dream, determined the question. He decided to go forward even if it involved covering the whole distance on foot. At the temple he made sure of meeting Rama Rajah and of obtaining water.

The west was beginning to glow with deep golden lights, and colour returned to the bleached landscape, purpling the long flat line against the orange sky. An occasional mimosa, bare of leaves, stood like a blackened skeleton by the wayside, silhouetted in the vivid sunset light ; or a palmyra reared its small round head upon a rough column of a stem. The dead vegetation and sandy soil were touched with fairy gilding dealt out with lavish hand, and the ground became an auriferous expanse that might have dazzled the eyes of greed and covetousness.

Jaganath's eyes swept the horizon again and again in search of the blue smoke of a villager's fire, or for the dust of approaching cart-wheels, as the eyes of a stranded mariner scan the wide sea for a sail. The world around him, for all its

splendour, was a desert, a drought-stricken waste from whose inimical climate bird, beast, and human-being had fled.

The sun touched the horizon, a ball of molten metal floating in a sea of lambent flames. The purples deepened to a rich madder, and the great waterless world that encompassed him became a glorious pageant, beautiful and appalling in its wealth of colour. The crimson sphere sank with the rapidity of the tropical sunset, dipping in a perpendicular path with what seemed to Jaganath a jerking movement, like the minute hand of some big clock. It was a relief to be free from the burning rays that scorched to the very last. But the relief had its price.

The Hindu is a timorous creature with a real fear of the supernatural, and Jaganath was a Hindu to his finger tips. In the gathering gloom indistinct shadows appeared to move where the whirlwinds had waltzed, and giant demons flung up long bony arms against the sky, or lifted shaggy heads above the plains, to stare at the bold human being, who dared to travel alone after sunset without a companion and without a light.

Though the mirage had faded, the memory of it remained imprinted upon the retina of his eye. He thought he could see the faint gleam of water lying not so very far from the road. Once or twice he stopped short and peered into the twilight half believing in the vision. Then the tales of the wiles by which the demons drew on their victims to destruction came surging back upon his memory. He shuddered and turned his head aside from the tempting vision as he had turned from the mirage. On the highway he was sure of his path and of ultimately reaching his destination. But if he once forsook that metalled way and plunged into the trackless waste of open country on either side, he might wander throughout the night and possibly the whole of the next day in his endeavour to regain the road.

Upon his arm was bound a small charm. It was placed there by his mother when he was a lad, and he recalled the warning words uttered by her lips as the silversmith welded the

wire bangle that held the talisman. She told him of the devils that were ever seeking to do mankind an ill turn. How they had little or no power during the day, but at night after the sun had gone down they wandered abroad full of evil design ; and woe betide the unfortunate creature who ventured out without some spell to safeguard him ! He involuntarily felt for the precious little charm. It was there, and by its virtue he knew that he need not fear the moving shadows of the twilight. The devils might make the desert their playground, and draw alluring pictures to deceive the thirsty traveller, but they could not inveigle him into their power against his will.

Nothing would have convinced Jaganath that his terror of the supernatural was groundless, and that every object that met his eye was natural and harmless ; that a leafless tree and stunted palm were the giant demons of his imagination ; that the blood beating in his strained eye-balls gave the landscape the fantastic effect of movement, and that the twilight reflected upon the bleached ground, aided by his intolerable thirst, suggested the water of the mirage. Had he caught sight of some half-starved jackal crossing his path, to him it would have been the restless spirit of some evil-doer, who in his lifetime had been wicked, had perhaps broken his caste-rules and held the holy ones in contempt.

Although the sun had disappeared the heat remained. It radiated from the plains as from plates of iron, and his sandals creaked noisily in their dryness as he planted his feet down with each plodding step. When he stopped to look at his watch he missed the regular sound and was uncomfortably conscious of the silence that reigned. It was seven o'clock, and he had been travelling four and a half hours. With the easy pace at which he had started and the stoppages he had made upon the road, he concluded that he had walked twelve miles at the very least. He was beginning to feel exhausted ; but his fatigue would not have troubled him if only he could have procured a drink of water. Food he could do without until the morning, but with his parched throat he knew that it would be impossible to rest or sleep whilst his suffering

continued. It drove him relentlessly forward, and he toiled on through the dust with feet like lead, increasing rather than decreasing his pace in his eagerness to reach his journey's end.

It was quite dark, the last red gleam of the sun having disappeared and the moon not yet risen. The road lay dimly pale before him with turning neither to the right nor to the left. The stars blazed upon the steely sky, the False Cross in the south heralding the rising of the more beautiful Southern Cross, which a little later would show itself recumbent upon the southern horizon.

At the end of three-quarters of an hour he stopped once more to look for signs of the jungle in which the temple stood. He feared lest he should pass it by in the dimness of the starlight. There was a crackling in the tinderlike herbage of the roadside as the creaking of his sandals ceased, and some startled creature darted away into the friendly darkness. It was probably a harmless lizard, possibly a snake less innocuous to any one who ventured too near. To Jaganath's superstitious mind it was nothing less than a lurking devil that had felt the effect of the charm. Again the silence of the night oppressed him. Usually the dark hours of the tropics are alive with the whisperings and flutterings of bat and moth and bird, but here the air was unmoved by beat of wing. Striking a match he looked at his watch. It was eight o'clock. Surely the temple could not be far off now.

With fresh courage he continued his weary tramp. Presently the line of the black horizon seemed to rise against the dark grey of the sky ; and what was that in the middle of it ? a group of palms ? or was it the rounded head of the temple tower ? Pressing on with reviving hope, the road led him close to a wood which he rightly surmised must be the jungle in which the temple was embosomed. His heart gave a sudden bound as he distinguished a tiny point of yellow light, shining from the goparum like the wakeful eye of the demon of the temple guarding his own chosen shrine.

It was a difficult task to discover the footpath that threaded

the thorny grove. He searched up and down, occasionally lighting a match to examine the ground. He also hunted for signs of the cart which ought to be waiting in the road, and more than once he shouted to attract the attention of the lad. It was strange that there was no sign of him, no camp fire, no deeply breathing cattle lying by their yoke. He retraced his steps to the footpath by which the temple was approached, and another lighted match showed him the ashes of a fire close to it, and the marks of wheels. Again he gazed into the darkness hoping to see the arched cover of the cart breaking the sky line. Cursing his folly for not having brought a lantern nor a bottle of water, he turned his attention to the footpath. Whether the cart and its occupants had departed or not, his thirst must be quenched or he would die. Already his lips were bleeding, and his throat burned as though it had been blistered.

Following up the path towards the temple, he frequently tore his skin against the spines of the blasted under-growth, in his haste to reach the well that he knew must be somewhere at the back of the building.

At the end of about a hundred yards the rough bushes ceased, and he found himself in an open space surrounded on all sides by the thorn jungle. In the centre of this space stood the block of buildings surmounted by the squat temple tower. He did not attempt to enter the shrine itself, but felt his way carefully round to the back, striking the ground with his umbrella to drive away the snakes.

The light of an oil lamp was reflected upon the wall of a dwelling enclosed by a verandah. Here was evidence at length of a man—the light in the tower was evidence only of the demon—and, filled with hope and joy, he shouted with all his strength. In answer to his call, the old pujari came hobbling out to ask who was the disturber of the night. He was accustomed to see occasional travellers who demanded water, and perhaps a little food, both of which he supplied at a profit to himself.

“ Water ! a drink of water ! Where is the well ? ”

The pujari pointed to a low wall close at hand just discernible in the dim light. Jaganath did not wait for further permission, but feeling for the bucket he flung it into the black depths, and when the handle ceased revolving he wound it as if for dear life. The liquid that he drew was muddy and thick, and possessed of a strong brackish flavour. But it was unpolluted by the touch of the lower caste and therefore it was welcome and pure to the famished man. Unmindful of typhoidal dangers, and supremely ignorant of the existence of bacilli and animalculæ, he imbibed deep draughts from his cupped hands. Again and again he drank, his thirst refusing at first to be quenched, and the old man shouted to him a quavering warning to restrain himself lest he should do himself some harm.

Refreshed and satisfied Jaganath walked up to the pujari as he stood upon the verandah against the light. He was greeted by the words—

“Now you want food, I suppose? Who are you?”

“I am a Vellalan, and I am seeking my cousin, the Assistant Collector of Madura.”

“I have not seen him,” he replied curtly.

“Did you have no one here yesterday to do puja, a young man and his wife praying for the blessing of the god upon her barrenness?”

“Ah! yah!” shouted the old man, nearly falling in his sudden agitation. “They came; but how was I to know who they were? The Assistant Collector of Madura! Aiyoh; that I should see the evil days that have fallen on me! What had he done to rouse the wrath of the holy ones, and bring misfortune upon his head?”

“Tell me where they are. Where is the cart that carried them here, and should have brought them back this morning in time for the day train?”

“The cart with the lady left an hour before dawn this morning. Did you not meet it? Aiyoh! I am a poor old man, the servant of this temple. Never before have I been so treated by the holy ones, locked within my own

room during the whole night and only liberated as they started."

"No cart has arrived at the station with the Assistant Collector, nor have I seen one upon the road. After the day train had departed I started to walk, hoping to meet them. I could not have missed them. Where can they have gone?" cried Jaganath, thoroughly puzzled, and considerably perturbed.

The old man gave way to extravagant expressions of grief. He wrung his hands, clasped his head, and slapped his hoary chest in his distress, pouring out a stream of self-pity which prevented him from hearing and answering any questions. At last Jaganath lost patience with him, and raising his voice, he shouted a command to be silent. In surprise, and some fear, the other ceased his wailing to stare at the stranger suspiciously. Was he going to be subjected to fresh violence?

"Listen, old father," said Jaganath less violently, as he noted the impression he had created. "Tell me, if you can, where your visitors have gone. Have they passed on to another temple?"

"The holy one did not say that they were going to another temple. How do I know what the swami intended doing?"

"The swami!" repeated Jaganath, puzzled.

"The guru who has taken the place of the old guru."

"Was he here?" inquired Jaganath, with a sudden throb of the heart.

"He awaited their coming, bringing with him his disciple, a strange hakim and his assistant. But they all departed together, and I am left alone with their wicked deeds. Aiyoh! that such evil times should fall upon me in my old age!"

Again he fell into maunding self-pity, until sharply checked by Jaganath.

"Did they all leave together?" he demanded, with undefined misgiving.

"The holy one and the lady occupied the cart; the other three walked."

"And the Assistant Collector, was he in the cart with the swami and the lady?"

"Aiyoh ! there will be trouble indeed ! The Assistant Collector ! But how could a poor, weak, old man, locked in' his own go-down, stand against the bad deeds of those three men ? "

"Was he in the cart ?" repeated Jaganath, raising his voice in his endeavour to make his words penetrate the understanding of the pujari.

"No, he was not able to travel."

"Then where is he ?" thundered Jaganath, losing his temper in his sharp anxiety.

The old man began to whimper, and nothing but the fact that he was under the protection of the deity of the temple saved him from receiving a violent shaking from the hands of the incensed, and now thoroughly alarmed, Jaganath.

"Where is he ? where is he ?" he repeated, with increasing vehemence.

The old man turned, too terrified to articulate, and pointed to an adjacent building. With a bound Jaganath was at the door.

"Brother ! brother !" he called, but he listened in vain for a reply.

He thrust open the door, and burst into the room which was illuminated by a single wall lamp, and then paused aghast at the sight that met his eyes.

On the floor lay Rama Rajah, weakened by loss of blood, and dazed by shock, but alive and conscious. His eyes turned with an agonized expression to his cousin, and a hand was feebly lifted by way of greeting. The warm tints of his skin had turned to a sickly yellow, and there were crimson stains upon his clothing. The old man had followed, and stood weeping miserably in the door-way.

"What is it, brother ; what has happened ?" asked Jaganath, breathlessly.

There was no reply, but the agonized eyes continued to rest upon those of the speaker.

"Tell me, brother ; what is the meaning of these stains ? Has any one done you a hurt ?"

Still there was no answer, and the crying of the old pujari became louder. Filled with a dreadful foreboding, Jaganath listed the lamp down from the wall, and knelt beside the prostrate body of his cousin. He examined his chest, and passed a hand rapidly hither and thither in search of some wound but could find none. Still the eyes followed his every movement, and seemed striving to tell him something. What revelation was it that the stricken man desired to make? Holding the lamp so that the light fell directly upon the haggard face, he once more appealed to him to say what it was that had brought him to this dire condition.

“ Speak, brother, speak, and say where you have been hurt, and what is the meaning of these stains ! ”

Very slowly, very painfully the parched lips opened and his mouth was extended wider and yet wider. With terrified gaze Jaganath looked at the tragedy that was unfolded. He uttered a sharp cry, and had not the old man darted forward to catch the lamp, perhaps another catastrophe would have been added through fire.

“ Brother ! brother ! ” cried Jaganath, in supreme horror, his countenance taking the hue of the face upon the floor. “ The curse of the guru ! It has come ! Oh ! my brother ! ”

Bowing his head he broke into bitter tears, adding his weeping to that of the old man, whilst Rama Rajah lay dumb before them, smitten with a silence that was to bind him in its inexorable fetters for his life.

CHAPTER XXIV

A CRY FOR HELP

A SWEET smell of growing vegetation went up from the watered earth under the warm rays of the afternoon sun. Dolores inhaled the fresh air with delight. Although deprived of the joy of sight, she shared with others the crowning blessing of life, good health. Her youthful blood stirred within her veins at the scent of budding flowers and at the sound of the songs of the birds.

She was strolling with Miss Beauchamp upon the breezy Pulney Hills, following a footpath known as Coaker's Walk at Kodaikanal. It was strange, with her infirmity, how she could enjoy the scenery. She had her own way of doing so, which needed the assistance of others, assistance readily given by the ladies with whom she was brought into contact.

They seated themselves upon a lichen-covered boulder that lifted its hoary head out of a bed of bracken and offered a temporary resting-place. Dolores sought for Miss Beauchamp's hand.

“Now let me see Perumal.”

Miss Beauchamp's fingers closed upon those of Dolores, lying over them with the forefinger extended. Carrying the small sensitive hand along she traced in outline the contour of the magnificent panorama spread out before them.

“Over there to the left is Perumal, rising above the other mountains in a cone-shaped peak with a saddle-back. Through the clear air we can see the grass that clothes it to the very top. Here and there patches of wet grey rock crop up out of the turf. The grand old hill is putting on colour in the

afternoon light with a glorious extravagance. I think those emerald tints must be the young grass springing up after the rain."

"Yes! yes!" cried Dolores, eagerly. "I can smell the young grass growing all round me here."

"It is the bracken that we have trodden down in reaching our seat on this rock. Now we will leave Perumal, sitting like a queen among that mountainous mass, and go on to the plains."

"What a curiously level line; it might be the sea," observed Dolores, as she felt her hand moved to another point of the compass.

"From the foot of the hills the country spreads out like a map and it is chequered with avenues, patches of cultivation, palm topes, villages, and tanks. It lies under a glowing haze of heat."

"But the rain has come to them as well as to us?" inquired Dolores.

"Yes; there are pools of water, like lakes, gleaming everywhere and replenished tanks and the flooded paddy-fields. Now lower your hand. Just here is a patch of deeper blue. There are several towers rising like this." She traced the outlines with her own and Dolores' forefinger.

"Yes! yes! I see them!" cried Dolores, with delight.

"The western sun is touching them with light. They are the goparums of the Madura temple and the dark patch is Madura town itself. The air is so clear that I think more rain must be coming. Mr. Newent's house ought to be just there, but of course it is too far off for us to be able to distinguish it from the mass of buildings. On the other side of the town is Sobraon Rao's house."

A little sigh escaped Dolores' lips, and her hand dropped into her lap as her thoughts were diverted from breezy Kodaikanal to steamy Madura. Miss Beauchamp glanced at her, knowing what was in her mind, and said—

"Perhaps the evening post will bring something. We wrote very urgently in the last letter. I am afraid that Veerama is forbidden by her mother to write."

"That is exactly what I have had in my mind. Yet Rama Rajah has not written either, and he is at liberty to do as he likes."

Miss Beauchamp endeavoured to bring Dolores' mind back to the beauties of the scene. She took her hand again and continued to follow the outline, omitting nothing from the ferns at their feet to the pale moon floating in the sky above the plains. The sun sank amidst a tropical wealth of rose and purple and red-gold. It dipped behind the hills, and the vast fields of colour that it left faded all too quickly.

"We must be going. The air grows cold as soon as the sun sets."

"How does Perumal take the sun's departure to-day?"

"It is already touched with what the Swiss call 'the death glow.' All its tints have turned to an ashen grey."

"Poor Perumal! It is doomed to lie dead until the sun once more kisses its head. Yes; let us go home; dead things make me sad."

They had not far to go. The house which Mrs. Newent had engaged for the season, stood in its own compound, the ground rising in a little hillock behind it and falling away in front. The hillock behind rose from the footpath which led to the front door, and was a smooth grass-covered mound crowned with a fine blue-gum. Bordering the path were a few narrow flower-beds lavishly filled with fuchsias, geraniums, and begonias. On the other side of the mound was a hedge of wattle covered with myriads of soft yellow tassels. The roadway, which ran below the house, was divided from the front garden by a hedge of pink cluster-roses, broken here and there by heliotrope and plumbago bushes. As if jealous of the modest cluster-rose, the yellow Gloire de Dijon and Marshal Niel of the garden sprawled their long arms in noble condescension over the fence and mingled their scent with that of the hedge-rose and the purple cherry-pie.

It was the season of the lily. Vying with the snowy Madonna lily of the wild mountainside, the Brazilian lilies opened their scarlet petals and the Crinums their sweet white

cups. The Agapanthus lifted blue clusters of flowers above foliage that hung in graceful growth like the combed locks of a maiden.

There was a seat beneath the tree, where Dolores and her friends sat when disinclined to wander further afield. Passers-by upon the road were unable to look across the hedge into the grounds; but Dolores could hear sometimes the chant of the bearers as they jogged along the last portion of their journey, passing on to the houses that were beyond, at an easy pace after the stiff climb on the ghat.

The house itself was a plain roomy bungalow that had been built by the American missionaries in the early days, when the grey squire lived, whose monument stands near Coaker's Walk. The windows of the sitting-rooms looked out upon the garden with the rose hedge and the road below. The bed-rooms looked out on the other side towards the wattle hedge. The front door opened on this side. When Miss Beauchamp and her companion walked up the path they were greeted by Mrs. Newent, who stood in the entrance.

"The evening post has come, and there is a letter for you, Dolores. It is on the drawing-room table. I have heard from my husband."

She proceeded to give them the news as they strolled into the house together, and sought the bright wood fire in the drawing-room. Mr. Newent was going out into the district, and was looking forward to a month of camping with more pleasure than usual. The rain had been general, and showers had fallen everywhere. The air was cooled, though the days were still hot. He had left the butler in charge of the house, and was taking the cook and the dressing-boy. The Assistant Collector, who had been acting for Rama Rajah, and was socially a pleasant young Englishman as well as a good officer, had been confirmed in the appointment.

"So we shall not have Rama Rajah back in Madura," remarked Mrs. Newent.

"I hope, after what Sir William has promised, that he will be sent to Tinnevelly," said Dolores.

"My husband says that Rama Rajah has applied for longer leave, and the three months' privilege leave has been turned into furlough. He hears that Rama Rajah has been ill."

"Dear me! What can have been the matter?" cried Dolores, in sudden anxiety.

"Probably fever, and a desire to stay a little longer in Tinnevelly. At the end of his leave Rama Rajah may possibly get the coveted appointment. 'Tell Miss Avondean,' writes my husband, 'that, though she may rejoice with Rama Rajah, I am still of the opinion that the appointment will be a mistake. His difficulties will be enhanced tenfold when he finds himself amongst his own caste people. He will be handicapped on all sides, and ready to put a bullet through his brain at the end of twelve months, if he has any conscience left.'"

"With his English education," objected Dolores, "he ought to be strong enough to do his duty to Government. It should be easier with his own people round him than with strangers, as they would naturally sympathize with him."

"A prophet is of no account in his own country, and a caste man is an unconsidered unit in the eyes of the heads of his caste. I am afraid, Dolores, that your kindness in using your influence with your old friend at headquarters, is a mistake, and poor Rama Rajah will not find his new appointment a bed of roses."

"I wish he would write and tell me how he is. I have never, even in England, been left so long without having news of some sort from him."

"Perhaps your letter contains the news you want."

Miss Beauchamp took up the missive, and broke the seal, saying—

"This ought to rejoice your heart, Loree. It is not from Rama Rajah but from Veerama."

Without further delay she began to read, "'Dear Miss Loree, I have been so much occupied with the festivities of my brother's wedding, that I have had neither time nor opportunity to write.' (The word opportunity is underlined.)

'The wedding passed off satisfactorily in the month of May, our lucky month for marriages. I was able to take my part in the ceremony, which pleased my brother.'"

"That means that Veerama went through the restitution of caste ceremonies," said Mrs. Newent. "Poor child! It must have been an ordeal for her."

Miss Beauchamp continued. "'For several weeks we have had parties, and have performed certain domestic ceremonies connected with the wedding, but they have now all come to an end, and the next event, to which my mother is looking forward, is my own wedding.'"

"Go on! go on!" cried Dolores, breathlessly, as Miss Beauchamp paused.

"The man she has chosen for me is of course a Shanar, a toddy-drawer from the South, who owns several acres of palmyras. He is forty years of age, and quite uneducated.' Those last three words," she said, "are crossed out, but I can read them clearly under the scratchings of the pen."

"She must refuse any bridegroom who is uneducated," exclaimed Dolores. "Don't you think so, Mrs. Newent?"

"A toddy-drawer certainly sounds unpromising, but that is the chief occupation of the caste. Her father has made quite a new departure with his tobacco trade and his educated children. I am afraid that if Veerama is to marry at all, she must accept a toddy-drawer of some kind. What else does she say?"

"He is a widower, without wife and children, and he lives sixty miles south of Madura, and about ten miles from the railway. My mother is desirous of having the preliminary ceremonies performed soon, with Desika to act instead of my father, so that on my father's return, the wedding may take place immediately. He has gone to Egypt, where he hopes to establish an agency at Cairo for Indian cigars. Desika has accompanied him as far as Bombay, where he is opening an office in connexion with the Egyptian agency. From there Desika is going to some of the Northern towns. My dear father does not return to Madura until the beginning of

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September. My mother is pleased with her new daughter. Although barely thirteen she is clever in household affairs, and has given us a new recipe for green ginger chutney. Dear Miss Loree, it grieves me to think that I shall not have the pleasure of seeing you again. By the time you come from the Hills my husband will have taken me into his family. I will try to remember all that you have taught me. Your loving Veerama. P.S.—My mother, who has seen this, begs me to say, that the husband she has chosen for me, will not require me to work in the fields, nor tend cattle, nor assist in the toddy making."

"Work in the fields, tend cattle, and help in the making of toddy!" repeated Dolores, with indignation. "I should think not indeed!"

There was silence born of consternation for several seconds. Then Mrs. Newent observed—

"She says nothing to indicate her own attitude toward this marriage."

"And there is no information as to the character of the prospective bridegroom except the two words 'quite un-educated.' They have been crossed out, showing plainly that the letter has been written under strict supervision," remarked Miss Beauchamp, as she laid the note down upon the table.

"May I see the letter?" asked Mrs. Newent. "How well she writes," she continued, examining the neat penmanship.

"When was it posted?" asked Dolores.

"The date is—dear me! it is written very small, and—what an odd hieroglyphic! LV.PS., 2—6. What can it mean, Miss Beauchamp? LV. Little Veerama. PS.—" She paused, at a complete loss to find suitable words for the last two initials.

She handed the letter back, and Miss Beauchamp read out again the four letters with the numbers without being able to suggest a clue to the mysterious cypher. Dolores leaned forward and spoke.

"Read it again! yes! Now again more slowly. LV. LV. Fifty-five! PS. Psalm! The fifty-fifth Psalm! Can

it be? Quick, Miss Beauchamp, a Prayer-book! Veerama has something more to tell."

"But Veerama is not a Christian," said Mrs. Newent.

"Nevertheless she has a Prayer-book and knows it well, as she has often read aloud from it."

In another minute Miss Beauchamp had opened a Prayer-book and turned to the fifty-fifth Psalm.

"There is no twenty-sixth verse; it has only twenty-five verses."

"Read the second to the sixth."

"Take heed unto me, and hear me, how I mourn in my prayer, and am vexed. The enemy crieth so, and the ungodly cometh on so fast, for they are minded to do me some mischief; so maliciously are they set against me. My heart is disquieted within me, and the fear of death is fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and a horrible dread hath overwhelmed me. And I said, O that I had wings like a dove! for then would I flee away, and be at rest."

"Oh! Veerama! my poor darling! that is a cry from your heart! What are they doing? They are killing you in the absence of your father. Mrs. Newent, I must start at once for Madura!"

Dolores rose at once, erect and determined, whilst her hostess gazed at Miss Beauchamp in perplexity.

"It is impossible to leave Kodaikanal without sending for bearers, and arranging beforehand for the transit to the station," replied Mrs. Newent.

"Sit down, Loree, and let us consider how best we may help the girl. After your experience with Rama Rajah's family you must admit that the zenana cannot be invaded at our will," counselled Miss Beauchamp.

"But there is no time to be lost," cried Dolores, in distress. "She says that her father is away and that her mother is pushing on the marriage. How can we help her but by going there and carrying her off by force?"

"That is impossible," declared Mrs. Newent, firmly and decisively. "The mere suspicion of such a high-handed

proceeding would close the doors of the zenana against us for ever. Veerama would be spirited away and lost to us altogether." She took up the letter and read it again, bringing her cool judgment to bear upon the matter. "Yes; I think that there is no doubt that the supposed date is a reference to the Psalm. It was clever of her to think of it, and the child must be in desperate need to have risked its discovery. I doubt if her brother would have let it pass; but the Hindu clerk, to whom the mother probably took the letter to have a translation made, had, fortunately for Veerama, no knowledge of the Psalms."

"We must do something to help her," cried Dolores, her hands clasped tightly in her effort at self-control.

"Certainly we must," replied Mrs. Newent, soothingly. "Now, let us see what she says, and if there is any indication of what she wants us to do. Give me the Prayer-book, please, Miss Beauchamp. 'Take heed unto me.' Take heed—Yes; indeed we must, or we shall land her as well as ourselves in trouble. 'They are minded to do me some mischief.' I am afraid that means persecution in the absence of her father and brother, and she herself is frightened. They are breaking her spirit, as many and many a gentle Hindu maiden's spirit has been broken before."

"In her trouble she wants wings with which she may get away. This means that she is ready, I imagine, to take some action herself if only we can supply her with them. The wings of the present day are not made with feathers; they are railway carriages and bullock-coaches."

"What other books does she possess besides the Prayer-book?" asked Miss Beauchamp.

"She has Shakespeare, Spenser, and Tennyson," answered Dolores, who was beginning to feel more hopeful.

That evening the three ladies of Mayflower House sat up later than usual over the wood fire that burned brightly upon the open hearth.

Perumal put on his rain cap and the moon was hidden by rolling clouds which were rent by streams of pale blue

electricity. With the shattering bursts of thunder the rain descended upon the hillsides. The Pambar river whitened with foam, as it roared down the beautiful valley at the foot of Levinge's sholah, and hurled itself over the edge of rock below Eagle's cliff in its wondrous leap to the plains. The pink balsams and delicate ferns drooped and nodded under the deluge. The great white Madonna lilies, growing wild over the face of the hills, bent their strong heads to the tropical rain, secure in their faith that to-morrow's sun would rise clear and bright to kiss them warmly, and ask for their homage of sweet odour and spotless beauty.

Dolores' faith and courage returned, but her mind was too full of hopes and fears to give thought to the blue lightning, the silver sheets of rain, the foaming river, and the peerless flower of the Madonna.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WAYS OF THE ZENANA

IT was true. The blessed rain had come at last, and the air was filled with the sound of the hiss and roar as it fell with tropical fury. Not only did man rejoice; but the beasts, patient in their sufferings, looked up gratefully as the drops beat upon them. The ugly cracks in the baked ground closed; the rustling dead leaves were beaten into the soil, a feast for the worms awakening from their torpidity; and the suffocating parching dust was laid. Everywhere green blade and leaf pushed their way up through the soft, warm mud, spreading a carpet of luminous verdure over the face of the earth. It was one of nature's most marvellous transformation scenes and was produced with magical rapidity. The birds sang in the drenched, glistening foliage; butterflies hovered over the swelling buds in the intervals of fierce sunlight; cicadas chanted a deafening chorus, whilst the emaciated cattle and goats lifted their heads and drew in deep breaths of the warm life-giving air, the dread of death no longer before their eyes.

Within the walls of Sobraon Rao's house little notice was taken of the sun and the rain. The big mistress had other matters to think about. The marriage of her son had been satisfactory. It only needed the marriage of her daughter to complete her satisfaction; and this she determined to compass in spite of Veerama's reluctance and Sobraon's sympathy with his daughter.

There was, however, no more personal violence. Much as the older lady desired to have recourse to methods which had

never failed in her young days to bring stubborn wills under subjection, she refrained; knowing that her husband would not permit it, and that her end would be defeated rather than promoted by any attempt of the kind. So there was no tying up by the thumbs and suspending from a hook; no trussing of the limbs with cords that galled the tender delicate flesh; no branding with a fire-stick, no dusting of red pepper into the wounds, or into the sensitive eyes.

But though these methods and many others of a like nature were prohibited, she was not at the end of her resources. There were ways, less rapid in their effect but none the less sure in the end. The first process was starvation. There was plenty of food on Veerama's plate, but the red pepper had been so freely sprinkled in its preparation that it was agony to eat it. Then there were the daily tasks. The assistance claimed in the kitchen, now that her caste had been restored, consisted, by the tacit consent of all the women of that department, of the grinding of curry-stuff and pounding of rice. Accustomed to the occupations of an English lady—the use of the needle and the pen, the reading of books and magazines, Veerama was unfitted to wield the heavy rice pounder and to turn the stone curry-mill. Her limbs ached and her muscles throbbed with pain; her eyes became bloodshot in the smoke-laden air of the kitchen.

Worse than her physical labours and discomforts was the lashing of the women's tongues. Following the cue given by the big mistress, every female in the establishment, from the old aunt at the head of the kitchen-women, down to the little daughter of a dependent cousin playing about the back verandah of the women's quarters, nagged and jeered at Veerama, holding her English education and her friends up to scorn, and accusing her of pride and disloyalty to her caste, her nation and her family. In coarse terms the older women described what she ought to desire in a husband, and inquired what she expected. Their words were echoed with astounding precocity by the younger members of the family, whose minds at that age ought to have been a blank page on such subjects.

Amongst the Hindus there is no reserve before children. They see no reason why reticence should be observed. Consequently, it has been said that there are no children to be found throughout the length and breadth of the continent; and that as soon as the little ones can comprehend their mother-tongue they are in that respect men and women who have nothing more to learn.

Through the careful teaching and the pure moral atmosphere in which she had lived with Dolores, the premature knowledge of Veerama's childhood had become dormant. Her mind had been cleansed and purified with intellectual pursuits. The freedom of speech throughout the household jarred horribly upon her modesty. When a small maiden of seven or eight years old trotted up to her, as she sat at the curry-mill in the kitchen, and demanded in coarse, plain language what she was afraid of, and why she did not like to become a wife and mother, she shrank with a visible shudder which roused a chorus of loud laughter: and the child was applauded for its impudent sally. Through all this persecution the preparations for the betrothal proceeded, indicating every hour of the day the inexorable fate that awaited her. Gradually her spirit sank, being crushed as surely as the rice beneath the iron-shod pestle which her aching arms lifted so wearily.

One morning she stood a moment to rest, the women of the kitchen taking the opportunity to pour upon her their coarse chaff, until she was driven in self-defence to resume the noisy pounding. Her mother entered as she lifted the pounder and announced that there was a letter for her. She ordered one of the other inmates of the kitchen to finish the pounding, and directed Veerama to come and read the letter.

She followed her mother into the sitting-room of the zenana with a beating heart. This was the reply to the letter she had written under her mother's supervision, announcing her approaching betrothal—the only letter of the many she had indited to her friend that had reached the post. The

rest had been destroyed by her mother's orders, some openly and some secretly.

The sitting-room abounded in mats and cushions for the use of the ladies who occupied it when their household duties were ended. One corner near the window contained a little table, an easy-chair, and a book-shelf placed there for Veerama's use by her father, and often the objects of scornful remarks when she made use of her European luxuries.

"Sit down, child, and read me what the lady says," said her mother, not unkindly, as she settled herself upon a cushion.

Veerama dropped wearily into her chair and broke open the envelope.

"Well?" ejaculated the lady, with impatience. "What is the news?"

"Miss Loree is in good health and likes being on the hills."

"What does she say? Tell me her words. You understand them but I don't. Read out the letter as if she had written it in our language."

Veerama ran her eye hastily through the pages. Had Miss Loree betrayed her?

"Quick, child, read on. Is anything the matter?"

"Dear Veerama, we were pleased to have your letter *under the date you mentioned*. So you have found a husband at last! We wish you every joy and hope that you will prove a good wife. After all, you are only following in the footsteps of your own mother, who has been a good wife to your father."

"Hah! That lady has some sense. It is a pity, child, that she has not given you some of it. Doubtless, poor thing, she would like to marry herself; but who would take one who was blind? Go on."

"I am sorry that we shall not see you again. It is doubtful if I return to Madura at all. I am so charmed with this place that I may remain here after Mrs. Newent leaves. I hope that you will not give up all your English reading now that you are going to be married. You were well taught in

England, and half an hour a day will help you to remember the language."

"The lady talks like a schoolmaster! What do women want with English? Go on and don't miss a single word."

Her mother's shrewd eye dwelt upon her with a shadow of passing suspicion as she continued—

"You cannot do better than study Shakespeare. You have a copy. Read the *Merchant of Venice* again. It is interesting and may be read many times with profit as well as amusement."

"Is it one of their sacred books?"

"No, mother. It is poetry and history."

"That is well. The guru says that the gods frown upon those who study the sacred books of other religions. Continue."

"Jessica's career is especially interesting—"

"Who is she?"

"One of the people in the book."

"Bah! how she chatters about books! What else is there?"

"We are interested to hear of your father's journey to Egypt. An agency there and at Bombay will double his wealth. He will be the richest Shanar in India."

"He is that already," commented the merchant's wife, with gratification and increasing good-humour. She had anticipated nothing less than outspoken antagonism in reply to the announcement of the projected marriage; and she was agreeably surprised and pleased at the manner in which the news had been accepted and the good advice given. The compliment to herself had not missed its mark. Veerama went on with the letter.

"Mrs. Newent and Miss Beauchamp are well, and we all enjoy the cool air of the hills. But since the rains have come I have felt the cold. I should be very grateful to you, if you would drive to the Collector's house one morning, as soon as your mother can spare you, and get out of my travelling-trunk a fur-lined coat. I left it behind, thinking that it would be too warm for the hills; but I made a mistake. It is in a cardboard box. The butler will give you some paper and string.

Please tie it securely and address it. On your way back call at the post-office, and send it off at once so that there may be no delay. I shall be very grateful if you will, with your mother's permission, do me this favour."

"H'm, why can't the Collector do it or the butler?" asked her mother.

"Here is the reason; Miss Loree says—'I am sorry to trouble you, but Mr. Newent is away in the district, and I do not like the thought of the butler turning the contents of my box over with his clumsy fingers. What would you like for a wedding present? A piece of jewelry? Consult your mother. It must be something handsome to show how much I love my dear pupil. With love and best wishes for your happiness, and every hope that you will be a happy wife, like your mother, I remain your loving friend, Dolores Avondean. P.S.—The butler will give you the key of the box; I have written him my instructions. Return it to him when you have taken out the coat.'

"A handsome piece of jewelry! Ah! well! What would be the use of being friendly with the cow if one got no milk? It shall be an English-cut diamond which your father shall have set as an earring."

"When shall I go and get out the coat? Miss Loree always felt the cold and loved her warm fur."

"The coat? We will see about it. But I cannot let you go alone."

"I can manage quite well. I have often been alone to the Collector's house," objected Veerama, with an eagerness she tried in vain to subdue.

"That may be; but you will not do so again. I may come with you myself or send my brother's widow. She will carry the parcel into the post-office, and send it off whilst you remain in the carriage." Then, seeing that her daughter was not satisfied, she continued, "You will not go alone, child. All that is at an end; and there will soon be a mother-in-law who will watch you like a cat watches a mouse, and give you less liberty than you have here."

"My future husband's mother is dead."

"There is his aunt, which means the same thing. Now I must be off. You may sit here and read your books—a fine waste of time which my mother would never have allowed. Give me the letter."

"I have read it all, every word."

"May be, but I will take it to the clerk in the office and see if he makes the same sense of it as you do."

Veerama delivered up the letter, and as her mother hustled from the room, she took down her cherished Shakespeare and turned to the *Merchant of Venice*.

The clerk satisfied the lady that the contents of the missive had been faithfully translated in full. She questioned him concerning Shakespeare and the *Merchant of Venice*. He had not kept up his English reading, and his knowledge of the great author was not as clear as when he left school. In consequence his pronouncement was the more sure, and his mistakes the more egregious. Mr. Shakespeare, Esquire, he explained, was a great English writer, who had many friends. Some were kings and princes, some merchants and murderers. The *Merchant of Venice* was one of the acquaintances of Mr. Shakespeare, a low person of Jew extraction, who tried to sell his daughter, Jessica, for a pound of human flesh. But she appeared in Court, and proved that it was against Government order to barter and traffic in human flesh. Having vanquished her father and frustrated his wicked designs, she married the man chosen by her mother, the princely possessor of three valuable caskets of jewels and three shiploads of valuable cargoes, and so she became a loving and dutiful wife. It was a tale that would do any daughter good to read, he said; and Veerama's mother went back to the women's quarters with her mind at rest.

The following day she drove to the house of Mr. Newent with the intention of doing the commission begged for in the letter; but the butler was firm in his refusal to give the key of the box to any one but the lady mentioned in the instructions received by him. Veerama's mother returned home

disappointed, and refused to give her daughter permission to go. Two days later a second letter arrived, this time from Miss Beauchamp repeating the request.

“Write and say that you will send the garment she wants in two days’ time,” said her mother at last. “It will not do to anger her or she will withdraw her promise concerning the jewel. Also write to your father; you have his address.”

“Yes; *Poste restante*, Cairo.”

“Tell him that the head clerk has despatched the samples he desires; and that your brother has written to say that he is going on to Delhi, Lahore, and so to Calcutta, as he hears there are more openings for agencies.”

“What is my brother’s address?”

“There is none. He tells the clerk that all his letters are to be sent to Bombay to await his return there.”

“He will be away some time. What does my little sister say to that?”

“She is gentle and submissive, and makes no complaint. It is he who will feel the separation. But they had five weeks together, and your brother promised your father that he would attend to the business as soon as the wedding festivities were over. If there is much delay I shall send his wife up to Bombay under my sister’s charge.”

“Perhaps you will go yourself, mother. The change would be pleasant.”

“Not until I have seen you married, my daughter,” rejoined the elder woman, sharply, as she departed on one of the many domestic errands that filled her life.

Veerama looked out of the window at the scarlet trusses of the flamboyant poinciana that shone with a dazzling glory of colour against the intense blue of the sky. The light was reflected in her own dark eyes, and her lips curved into a smile that rarely now lightened up her face. Then she caught her breath in a little sigh as she whispered to herself—

“Ah! but I have no Lorenzo to help me!”

By which it will be seen that she had found time to study the interesting career of Jessica.

CHAPTER XXVI

POSTING A PARCEL

It was strange to Veerama to be standing once more in the wide palm-decked verandah of the Collector's house. To all appearances it was the same, yet there was a subtle difference owing to the fact that the rooms were empty, and the gentle ladies whom she loved were gone.

The butler, clothed in white, stood in the entrance, and a belted peon rose to his feet as the carriage drew up. In the garden, the gardeners were busy with the picottah, drawing the evening supply for watering, to the chant that their forefathers sang from time immemorial. Upon the warm slates of the roof the crows cawed and croaked. The squirrels ran, shrieking, with tales erect, along the parapet. The sparrows chirruped and pecked among the pot-plants ; and along the smooth, gravel paths between the garden beds, the hoopoe with tawny gleaming plumage pursued the incautious ant.

Veerama stepped out of the carriage, her white muslin saree draped in soft folds round her figure. She was followed closely by the relative into whose charge she had been given with many injunctions to observe her every action. As they mounted the steps the butler advanced with a deferential salaam, as was only due from a Pariah to ladies of a higher caste.

“I have been asked to take something out of Miss Avondean's trunk.”

“A fur-lined coat, lady. She has ordered me to hand you the key, which is to be given back on your departure.”

He presented the key with both hands, and the aunt was

gratified to note the respect which he showed. As she took it Veerama asked for paper, string, and a label. They were ready upstairs in the room formerly occupied by Miss Avondean. She moved towards the staircase. Her relative followed ; but the butler interposed.

"I have orders only for one lady to go to the room. Has any other order been received ?" he asked.

There was nothing to be done but to submit, and Veerama mounted the stairs alone, with quick, eager steps. At the butler's suggestion her chaperone seated herself upon some silken cushions, which he brought with polite attention from the drawing-room.

The syce squatted down under the horse's nose ; and the coachman, after waiting a few minutes to see if the young mistress were returning immediately, climbed down from the box of the carriage, and went off to the stables to have a chat with the Collector's coachman, who, in his master's absence, had more time on his hands than he knew what to do with.

A quarter of an hour passed and there was no sign of Veerama. The aunt arose from her comfortable seat where she had well-nigh fallen asleep and called to the butler. He came, and she inquired where the lady was. He replied that she was still busy tying up the parcel.

"Go and tell her that we shall lose the midday post if she does not hurry."

A few minutes later Veerama appeared with the butler who carried a parcel which he arranged inside the brougham.

"I found the coat at the bottom of the box, and I had to repack everything," explained Veerama. "Then I had a hunt for white paper to put inside the box. The butler had only provided brown for the outside wrapper. Now it is all ready. Here is the key, butler. We must drive to the post-office on our way home."

She began to descend the steps towards the carriage when her aunt stopped her.

"How are we to pay for the postage of the parcel ? I have no money ; have you any ?"

“My mother gave me none.”

Veerama glanced from her aunt to the butler, who pulled a small bag out of his belt and waited for orders.

“Give me two rupees. It will be sufficient.”

He handed her the sum, and she passed it on to her aunt, remarking that as she was to post the parcel she had better take the money at once. Bidding the butler enter the sum in the house-account, Veerama stepped quickly into the carriage, and they drove away to the post-office.

It was situated in the town, and at its entrance there was the usual little crowd of people coming and going through its doors. One touch makes nature kin, and no touch can be more effectual in that respect than the modern invention of the post-office. Men and women throughout the civilized world gather at the post-office to buy stamps, to post letters, to send off parcels, to despatch messages by the far-reaching wire, to cash money-orders, and to ask a hundred relevant and irrelevant questions of officials, who take their time to reply.

Into a little crowd of people, requiring something or other at the hands of the clerks behind the wire-netting, pushed the older lady, bearing the parcel and the two rupees. According to the rules that govern postal affairs in India, she had to sign or affix her mark to a paper as well as to pay the postage and to receive a receipt, all of which took time. The syce and coachman were aware that the business would not be transacted in a hurry. They therefore settled down once more to a certain ten minutes of ease, the syce just beneath the horse's nose and the coachman on the box.

The roadway was thronged with carts and jutkas with occasionally a bullock-coach or a brougham. In spite of recent rains the dust flew in the midday sun in soft clouds of gold. By the side of the street flowed a constant stream of humanity, not so dense as to jostle each other, but never ceasing in its coming and going. There were coolies, naked except for the loin-cloth, peons coated and belted, women draped in bright-coloured cloths going out into the country to cut grass or to carry food to their husbands. There were clerks and

schoolboys intent on the midday meal, beggars and travellers, Eurasian men in white coats and trousers, Eurasian women in skirts and the enveloping shawls worn over the head in Portuguese fashion.

Neither the syce nor the coachman took any notice of the passing crowd. They were engaged in an absorbing discussion concerning a sick relative of the Collector's coachman, whose symptoms pointed to nothing less than the possession of a devil. There was to be a great driving-out ceremony, when the patient was to be beaten within an inch of his life, and the devil would be so much disgusted at the pain inflicted upon him that he would quit his uncomfortable quarters without further ado. The symptoms were wonderful, unlike any that had hitherto been exhibited. The narration of them in minute detail held the two men absorbed until the lady returned.

At the sight of her the syce rose at once and ran to the carriage door, flinging it open for her to step in without any delay. But as she put her foot upon the step to enter a cry of dismay escaped her lips.

“Where is the young mistress?” she gasped.

“In there, lady,” replied the syce, without looking into the vehicle.

“She is gone! What have you done with her, you fool?”

The coachman leaned over, at the imminent risk of falling off his seat, in his astonishment; whilst a little crowd began to gather in a semicircle round the carriage.

“Isn't the young lady there?” he asked, in blank surprise.

“I tell you she is gone. She must have followed me into the post-office.”

The distracted woman turned back into the building, whilst the syce shook the cushions and hunted in all the crannies, as though Veerama had been a rupee instead of a maid of solid flesh and blood.

“The young missie was there a few seconds back,” said the coachman to the syce, “I saw her myself,” which was the particular lie he intended the other to support him in.

The aunt returned after a fruitless search and questioned

the two men closely. They vowed that they had seen her there up to the moment when the other lady had taken off their attention by appearing in the doorway. The crowd pressed upon the distraught woman, offering her a number of solutions to the mystery. A peon had seen the lost girl walking away from the carriage. A grass-cutter had seen her riding in another carriage towards the big temple. A prosperous-looking chatty leaned out of a jutka on the other side of the brougham, and asserted in a strident voice that the lady must be mistaken, and that there never was a girl in the brougham at all. The traffic in the road stopped, and the dust of many restless feet rose thicker and thicker. At last the coachman had an inspiration. She had returned to the Collector's house and they would find her there. He begged the lady to get in as quickly as possible, which she gladly did, as much to be free from the pressure of the ever-increasing crowd as to depart on the search.

With slashings of the whip, and much rearing on the part of the impeded horse, they jerked, and swerved, and zig-zagged a way out of the crowd without any serious collisions, although the varnish was chipped off in more than one place, and a strap was broken. At a hand-gallop they raced back to the Collector's house, and were met in the verandah by the imperturbable butler. He heard the tale of the mysterious disappearance with stolid equanimity to the end, and then solemnly assured them that she was not there. The aunt demanded that a search should be made through the house, which was willingly granted. He begged her to look for herself where she would, and led the way upstairs. The numerous inhabitants of all the stables and go-downs in the vicinity assembled round the coachman to hear the tale, which, however, merged into the more exciting story of the possessed patient who was to have the devil cast out of him. The Aunt insisted on having the trunk opened, and she hunted high and low throughout the house, assisted by every servant that had been left in the place.

But the search was unavailing; tired out and terrified at

the thought of facing Sobraon Rao's wife without her charge, the poor lady began to cry. They all respectfully waited till the storm of her tears was abated, and then the butler suggested that perhaps Missie had become weary of waiting so long at the post-office and had gone home on foot. That was what English Missies did nowadays. They never waited for any one, but went where they listed without any companion.

The suggestion brought consolation ; but it was too good to be true, and she refused at first to give it credit. Presently the butler pointed out the fact that the lady had no money, no food and no carriage. How could she go far away under such circumstances ? Then he questioned the coachman and syce with the air of authority that the servant of the Englishman instinctively assumes towards stable folk. They repeated their story of having seen her sitting in the carriage up to the moment of the return of the elder lady, a tale which, by constant repetitions, they both firmly believed themselves by this time. The butler reserved his opinion as to the truth of the statement, and repeated his suggestion that the Missie had walked home like an English Missie, and he recommended them to drive there.

It seemed the only thing to be done, and once more the coachman lashed the horse into furious speed and swung the carriage home, narrowly shaving corners, and marvellously escaping collisions. He pulled up in a cloud of dust, worthy of the occasion, with a rattle of harness that brought several members of the family to the door.

The story of Veerama's disappearance was poured forth in disjointed fragments by all three, with frequent demands as to whether she had been seen. No ; she had not arrived at the house. A search was made, but it was unsuccessful ; nobody had cast eyes upon her since she drove away with the aunt. Reproachful looks rested upon that unhappy lady who gave herself over to grief and despair.

The household gathered round the big mistress in blank wonderment. The cooking pots seethed upon the kitchen fires unattended ; the fowls walked in unchecked and helped

themselves from the heap of rice that was in process of cleansing ; the crows dipped their beaks into the creamy-white ghee, and the sparrows pecked ruinously at the rice-cakes. No one could think of anything but the missing daughter of the house. Where could she have gone ? No money, no food, no clothes but those she stood up in, and no conveyance of any kind ! It was impossible that she could have gone far.

How the whisper arose no one knew, or who first gave utterance to the terrible thought, but ten minutes later, when every conjecture had been set aside as impracticable, the terrible words burst from their lips—

“ She has thrown herself down the well ! ”

All eyes were focussed upon the big mistress as the appalling belief strengthened, and there was an ominous silence which was broken by a piercing shriek from the distracted mother, who loved her daughter in her own way. They led her to her room where she abandoned herself to her sorrow, beating her head upon her cushions with loud lamentations. This was what came of sending her daughter to England ! Never, never would she consent again to any member of the family going to England ! No, not if Desika had fifty children should a single one of them cross the sea with her consent to that far-away country, where they taught that right was wrong, and wrong was right, where there was no caste, where sons and daughters governed their parents, and where a refractory child could neither be beaten, nor burned, nor tied up, nor peppered, nor starved, nor temporarily crucified !

Not very far from Madura is the station of Ammayana-yakanur. It is here that the visitors to the beautiful Pulney Hills of South India leave the train and take the bullock transit to the foot of the ghat. When the season comes for the migration to cooler climes the quiet little station is the scene of unusual bustle. Servants in charge of piles of luggage scurry backwards and forwards between the station and the dak bungalow close at hand. The harsh voices of the bullock-drivers, and the deep sighing of the patient beasts fill the air. They are echoed by the crows and monkeys in the avenue of

trees that shade the road, as the creatures await eagerly the leavings of man and beast after the evening meal.

On this occasion there were no languid mothers with thin pale-faced children descending from the train. The only person to alight was a shawled Eurasian, carrying her personal effects in a bundle. She delivered up her second-class ticket, and inquired of the ticket collector if any conveyance was waiting for Miss Avondean's maid. Yes, a bullock transit had arrived; the station-master had received instructions two or three days ago to see that the maid in question was duly sent on to the foot of the hills, where bearers had been ordered to carry her up the ghat. The clerk glanced at her with a contemptuous look, and took his time in imparting the information of her arrival to his superior. That individual presently appeared, portly and pretentious, in uniform that was spic and span. He spoke to her in English with a strong accent.

"Are you the lady's maid expected by Miss Avondean? Where is your chit?"

She showed a sheet of paper on which was written—"Please pass on bearer, Isabella Rosario, my maid. Dolores Avondean, Mayflower House, Kodaikanal."

"Yes, that is the same hand. The lady has written to me, asking me to see that you have food. Go to the Dak bungalow and you will find a curry prepared. The charge is a rupee; have you got the money? Good; then you will pay the bungalow servant and charge it in your travelling expense which the lady must refund. At seven o'clock you will start. If the transit is not ready, send the bungalow servant over to the station to inform me. That is all; you can go."

He watched her cross over to the bungalow, and then turned to the ticket clerk, a man of his own caste—

"How these English ladies are imposed upon in their kindness of heart! That woman calls herself a Eurasian maid, and gives herself the airs of a European. She keeps the transit waiting here at her mistress's expense for two days. Hallo! what are they wiring about in the office? Anything wrong with the line?"

At the ting of the bell of the receiver the clerk hurried to the office ; the station-master followed him.

“ The Police Inspector at Madura wants to know if a native lady got off the train that has just gone through, a young lady in a white muslin saree, and wearing a good deal of jewelry, heavy silver anklets, and toe-rings.”

“ Tell them that we have no one here answering that description. The only female to alight was a Eurasian servant who has been expected for the last two or three days, of the name of Isabella Rosario. Who is it that is missing ?”

“ They don’t mention her name.”

“ They had better look for the lady in the tank. Native ladies don’t run away by train. If a husband ill-treats a wife she jumps down a well, and he may console himself by choosing another. Have we not a saying that a widower’s mourning ends with the funeral ceremonies ?”

Soon after sunset the bullock cart quietly set off for its night’s journey to the foot of the hills. The station-master, mindful of the charge imposed upon him, noted its departure, and having good-naturedly fulfilled the commission, cast the matter from his mind.

The wings of the dove had been found, and the poor persecuted child was fleeing to the hills with a lightened heart. This was better than having recourse to the well, which would undoubtedly have been her fate, had not England done something to implant a spirit of independence, courage, and freedom in the heart of India’s gentle daughter.

CHAPTER XXVII

REVENGE

DORASWAMY's wife was becoming uneasy at the long silence of her son. The period of his privilege leave was expired, and they ought all to have returned to Madura by this time, unless the English lady had been faithful to her promise and had succeeded in obtaining the Tinnevelly appointment.

Lukshmi had returned alone from the pilgrimage to Karlipet, bringing a tale of how her husband had put her into a first-class ladies' compartment in the train, and had declared his intention of paying a visit to the blind lady at Kodaikanal, in order to press on her the performance of her promise. This seemed reasonable, and was accepted without question. In answer to the catechizing she received concerning the performance of the pujah at the temple, Lukshmi had her story complete in all its details. Yes; they had made a successful visit to the temple, although the journey was tedious and very hot. The offerings had been presented, and the pujari had promised the speedy fulfilment of her wishes. They had driven back to the station, and Rama Rajah, with his cousin, had gone to Kodaikanal while she had continued her journey to Tinnevelly.

Two months elapsed without a word from Rama Rajah. Then came a letter dated from St. Thomé near Madras. In it he told his father that he had had a severe illness; but he said nothing about coming home.

Lukshmi listened eagerly for news, and not without certain qualms of fear. The black deed perpetrated at Karlipet in the dead of that fatal night was known to her. She was not exactly accessory to the fact before it took place, but she must

have had a shrewd suspicion that some evil was intended. If she reasoned at all, she believed that the evil intended by the guru would descend in some supernatural manner. A curse of dumbness had been pronounced, and by some means or other it must inevitably be fulfilled. With this knowledge of impending evil she had, in accordance with the direction of the guru, decoyed her husband to the temple. As she afterwards thought of how the curse was fulfilled, she trembled for the consequences. The guru had means of hiding himself, but she was to be found by her outraged and justly incensed husband at any moment. And if he followed the traditions of his family and of his caste, he would punish her with his own hand after the manner of his forefathers in the seclusion of the zenana.

But Rama Rajah had not been brought up like his forefathers, and it was more than probable that he would imitate the race that had given him education, and would be as mild and forbearing as he had been in the matter of the pistol. Never once had he lifted his hand against her, or struck a single blow when irritated and angered, as he had often been at Madura. He was a poor-spirited creature in her opinion, of whom no one need be afraid. After what had happened he would hide his head in life-long shame in the bosom of the family like a whipped dog, and be of no account whatever.

Having quelled her fears in this manner, she rejoiced in her secret soul at her husband's misfortune, and revelled in the thought that the curse had fallen. She had no pity for his suffering, no thought of the ruined life. She could look back, when she believed that there was no chance of retribution overtaking her, and gloat over the triumph of that night. As he lay gagged and bound, but as yet unhurt, she had followed the guru into the room. She heard him repeat his curse over the prostrate man, concluding with the terrible words—

“Silence shall be the fate of the rash being who defied the will of the gods, a silence that shall cause all men to turn away in horror.”

To these Lukshmi had added her shrill invectives, “You

hear what the swami says! You shall be dumb; he has decreed it! And she—that Englishwoman who loves you—shall turn from you in horror! She shall never hear again that voice which brought the rose colour to her cheek. She will drive you from her presence and hate you."

Even then, neither Rama Rajah nor his wife fathomed the full and awful meaning of the curse. As the guru left the room with Lukshmi the hakim and his assistant entered.

"I have been asked by your wife to operate on you, sir, for cancer," he said in a smooth professional voice.

There was a short struggle; but one man bound had no chance in the hands of two men who were free. Then all was darkness, and Rama Rajah thought that death had come.

As he recovered his senses under the restoratives administered he heard the hakim say outside the door of the room—

"It was a bad case of cancer, most holy one, and I have saved his life by the removal of it. It will prove a complete cure, and there will be no recurrence of the disease. All that is necessary now is nursing and care."

The hakim did not leave him as long as there was any danger from haemorrhage. They released the old custodian of the temple, and gave him certain instructions. Before dawn they all departed, obliging the lad with the bullock cart to drive them to the next station on the line.

Rama Rajah lay in the valley of the shadow of death, longing for the darkness to close round him for ever. The wish to live was killed within him, and he believed that his weakness meant death.

Then came Jaganath, kneeling by his side and calling him by name. His tears and bitter lamentations awoke the moribund spirit, and summoned back the fainting soul from the gates of death. As the lamentation changed under the influence of gathering wrath into angry denunciations against the perpetrators of the deed, a flame of fury and revenge was kindled in the heart of the victim. He would not die; he would live to repay the evil.

It was not against the hakim that his wrath burned. He,

who had executed their atrocious order, was a mere tool in the hands of the guru and his companion. A sum of money and the threat of a curse was sufficient to conquer all scruples, even though the hakim was a Muhamadan and a wanderer from far-off Cabul. Rama Rajah felt little more towards the man and his assistant than he felt towards the knife that was used. His anger was concentrated upon the guru and upon his own wife. The guru he would hunt down even to the sacred precincts of the temple, and he would kill him with his own hand as soon as that hand should have the strength and cunning. As for his wife——! He writhed in his impotent fury as he gained strength enough to recall the past and brood upon the future. He had treated her as no Hindu wife had been treated before. He had endeavoured to raise her to his own level and let her feel that he regarded her as his equal. He had given her the consideration that Englishmen accord to their wives, and this was her return; the base ingratitude of her conduct stirred every dormant evil passion and quickened it into activity.

The attempt with the pistol upon his life had startled him, but her ignorance of the weapon had induced him to believe that the attempt to kill him was not seriously meant. He did not see the pistol held to his temple as Jaganath had seen it, and he never realized how near death had stood to him. He ought to have been warned by the incident, but he was not. It was impossible to credit the fact that his young wife had deliberately contemplated murder.

But now his eyes were opened, and he saw the blackness of her heart. The physical shock of the operation had been severe, but it was increased by the mental shock that this enlightenment brought. The realization of her wickedness overwhelmed him. Under its influence Western teaching with its doctrines of forgiveness melted away into nothing. They shrivelled and peeled off like the European veneer on Indian teak-wood before the scorching heat of a fierce fire. Revenge, retribution, and retaliation were the black spirits which stood by his side and bade him live.

It was some time before Jaganath learned all the details of that terrible night. When the patient was strong enough to hold a pencil some of the story was written, not in a long consecutive tale but in fragments elicited as replies to questions. As Jaganath read each damning detail his wrath blazed forth into angry speech. The long pent-up hate flowed from his lips unchecked by sign or gesture from Lukshmi's husband. Never before had he dared to say all he thought, for in former days Rama Rajah would not hear any criticism of his wife. But now he listened, in the fateful silence that enveloped him, with glowing eyes and deep-set hate ; and the fruit of his hatred was slowly maturing with his recovered strength.

“Live ! live ! my brother ! Live to repay the evil ! There are many ways—oh ! there are many ways in the privacy of the zenana of returning it. Not by death ! That would be too merciful. No ; our ancestors had other means by which they punished their women, spoiling their beauty and rendering their lives as hideous as their faces, more hideous even than the life of the widow ! And the guru ?” He cast a look of inquiry at his cousin. “The police could make his life a burden if they dared to interfere with the swami.”

Rama Rajah made a sign of dissent and his pencil wrote—

“I will have nothing to do with the police. They shall not enter my father's zenana.”

“The swami will not dare to show his face again ; but if he comes—then with your own hand must you deal the blows that shall punish, even as you will deal the blows that shall blast the life of the woman who has brought this evil upon you.”

As soon as Rama Rajah was able to be moved, Jaganath took him away to the sea. They went down to Madras and hired a little bungalow in the sleepy old port of St. Thomé. The grounds ran down to the seashore and here Rama Rajah sat all day long, breathing the warm moist air and brooding over the ruin that had been wrought in his life. It was nothing short of complete and disastrous ruin, black and hopeless in its outlook, without a single ray of light to gild the future.

Maimed as he was, all thought of continuance in the service of Government was at an end. It would be necessary to retire, and perhaps he would be given a small pension. But the loss of his salary did not trouble him. It was the relinquishment of the work that he grieved over. He liked his profession, and he had thrown himself heart and soul into the work with a great ambition before his eyes. He hoped that one day he might rise to a high position, shaking himself free from the trammels of his family, and doing his duty with the whole-heartedness and integrity of an Englishman. Then he would show the world how India might be governed, as well by one of her own people as by the foreigner.

His hopes and ambitions for the future were all destroyed by the crushing calamity which had overtaken him. Never again could he take part in the government of his country or occupy any public position. Nor could he mix again with his fellow-men. The loss of speech unfitted him for every profession. As he contemplated his future, a dull grey colourless existence of uselessness rose before his eyes and appalled him. There was not a single redeeming feature to soften the picture. When the craving for revenge was satisfied to its fullest extent, what remained? Nothing but a miserable retreat to the loneliest corner of the continent that he could find. Deprived of the power of communication, except by signs and gestures, or at most a hoarse whisper, with so little articulation in it that it would be difficult to understand, he was completely cut off from communication with his fellow-men. A strong animal instinct prompted him to escape from the haunts of human beings, and lead a half-savage life of morose brooding, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him. Maimed and crippled as he was, he felt that humanity would turn from him with an antipathy that could not be conquered. There might be pity mingled with it, but the feeling of aversion towards the maimed was a deep-rooted instinct too general to be ignored. He had felt something of it himself when he first met Dolores, and he remembered also how her infirmity had repelled his wife. The loss of sight

from birth without any accompanying deformity was trifling in his eyes compared with his own loss. In its magnified proportions it appeared as an insuperable obstacle between himself and Dolores as well as the rest of the world. How could he present himself before her wrapped in the inexorable silence that, without the aid of sight on her part, rendered all communication impossible. The words of his wife rang in his ears—

“And she, that Englishwoman who loves you, shall turn from you in horror.”

With a shudder he banished the thought of Dolores, and fixed his mind upon the future with sinister intention, his Hindu nature rising unchecked in the semi-savage desire for revenge and the determination to accomplish it.

There were several matters to be attended to while they were near Madras. Among others he arranged that his short privilege leave should be turned into furlough of longer duration. At the expiration of the furlough he intended to go before the medical board. There might be difficulties in the way of obtaining the pension, as he had not been attended by one of the Government medical officers. But he did not trouble himself on that score. If the pension were refused, his father could afford to keep him in the simple retirement in which he would be forced to live. For the present he drew a furlough allowance, which was more than sufficient for his needs, and there was no necessity to think of that part of the future.

Strength and healing came quickly to the body of the casteman, whose vegetarian diet and abstemious habits gave him pure blood and a healthy skin ; but no balm fell upon the wounded spirit. The crushing blow had killed every tender shoot and branch grafted by Western education upon his Eastern nature, as the scorching sun had blasted the tender vegetation in the drought-stricken plains of the South. Everything was dead within him, but the fierce oriental craving for revenge which he had inherited from his ancestors.

He rose from his bed of sickness a changed man. Those

past years spent in England were swept away like a dream of soft sleep. The soul that Dolores had known and which had blossomed under the touch of her tender hands was stricken with a deadly paralysis ; and there awoke by the booming surf on that sandy shore, a giant of hatred intent on rendering evil for evil, a veritable demon of revenge.

In utter ignorance of the ball of fire that burned under that awful silence, Jaganath spoke things which only added to the flame. He suggested various ways by which adequate punishment might be meted out. Most of them consisted of mutilation in some form or other. He scarcely realized what he suggested ; he talked wildly and at random, as the injudicious nurse talks to her angry little charge, and promises to "catch that naughty man and cut him into bits," because he has offended her darling. Jaganath with the best intentions in the world, imagined that he ministered consolation to his cousin by drawing pictures of the accomplishment of his revenge.

Far from consoling, the suggestions only tore open the wounds afresh. Often the eyes flashed and glowed as the mind dwelt upon the wrong that had been done.

One evening, when the sky was aflame with the crimsons of the tropical sunset, and the sea had mantled itself in deep indigo blue, Rama Rajah rose from the chair that had been placed where the grass of the compound merged into the sand of the seashore. He strode towards the bungalow, entered by the wide-open door and clapped his hands, the signal by which he summoned his cousin.

Jaganath came from the direction of the kitchen where he had been superintending the preparation of the evening meal.

"What is it, brother ?"

Rama Rajah pushed a slip of paper into his hands. On it was written : "To-morrow we will return to Tinnevelly."

A light leaped into the eyes of Jaganath as he read it.

"Good ! Your hand is strong enough now to deal the blow."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SIGHT OF BLOOD

THE ancestral home of Rama Rajah differed considerably from the bungalow occupied by the family at Madura. The house in Tinnevelly was built after the native plan in the shape of a quadrangle, enclosing an open courtyard. In the front there was a raised verandah furnished with seats of masonry built against the wall. The doorway of the front entrance was massive and adorned with rich carvings, black with age. The door itself was panelled and studded with ornamental iron nails. It led into a hall which was unfurnished except for mats, and some rolls of pillows and rugs tossed carelessly into a corner. Some of the male members of the family made it their sleeping-chamber when the weather was too cold to allow of sleeping in the verandah, and in any case found it convenient to keep their mats and pillows there.

Opening into the courtyard were the kitchens, storerooms, granary, and women's quarters; also another hall which adjoined the kitchen, and was used as a dining-room.

Light and air were admitted from the courtyard where a couple of palm-trees reared their graceful heads. Excepting for a small back door, leading into the kitchen garden, there were no means of communication with the outer world. The strong, thick walls, seen from the outside, presented a windowless inhospitable appearance, such as in England would have suggested a prison or a reformatory. To the oriental it merely represented the privacy of caste.

It was a busy little patriarchal world that centred round Doraswamy, and looked towards him as its head. In addition

to the number of persons who, by virtue of their relationship no matter how distant, claimed a shelter beneath his roof, there were other village people living in smaller houses on the other side of the road. There was the carpenter, blacksmith, barber, and other tradesmen, as well as some labourers for whom Doraswamy could usually find employment. Their mud-huts were small and insignificant compared with the house of the big land-owner ; but they were all built on the same plan with an enclosed yard and blank outer walls. Each had its patch of garden, its fowls and goats, with perhaps a buffalo or two.

The eight o'clock morning meal was finished, and the various inmates of Doraswamy's domicile had scattered to take up the different tasks appointed to them. The work was not heavy, and it was undertaken with the light-hearted cheerfulness which is the characteristic of the children of the sun. The master himself, after having despatched each man and boy upon his errand, strolled off to a neighbouring village to pay a visit of congratulation to a family of his own caste in which a marriage had lately taken place. As he moved along the footpath that followed one of the raised banks of his own broad fields, he glanced back at the smiling acres with satisfaction. Stalwart nephews, brothers-in-law, and cousins drove the well-fed cattle before the plough, or sowed the seed, or weeded the up-springing grain. Lads were busy in the cattle-pens behind the kitchen, and small boys led forth the herds of goats to the waste ground beyond the irrigated land. As joyous and careless as the birds and butterflies that revelled in the warm rays of the sun, they went to their labours full of laughter and light talk, ready to do the bidding of the easy, good-humoured master who fed and housed them, and made himself responsible for their marriages and their burials. No thought of strikes or want of employment troubled their minds. As long as there was grain in the store there was food for them all, whether there was work to be done or not.

Inside the house the women were busy with their various duties apportioned to them by the mistress. The fowls were

tended and the eggs gathered; water was drawn from the well, and the large cooking pots, which would presently be seething upon the fire, were filled ready for the reception of the grain for the midday meal. Brass and copper vessels were polished; curry-stuff was ground, and onion and green ginger were sliced to season the freshly made chutney, which was to be eaten with the curry. The vegetables were not yet brought in from the large garden behind the house. Doraswamy's wife had, herself, gone out to superintend the gardener in the gathering of a basketful of succulent seed-pods to make the much-loved drum-stick curry.

Lukshmi sat in the dining hall, where she was occupied in a leisurely fashion in folding some silk sarees that had lately been in use. The camphor-wood box that stood open ready for their reception diffused its aromatic scent upon the air. She was alone, the elderly relative who had brought the cloths to her, having departed on another errand.

Through the doorway she could see the graceful fronds of the palms in the courtyard, waving in the morning breeze against the azure of the sky. The peaceful beauty of the perfect day brought no remorse to her soul for the black deed done at Karlipet. A strange contentment enveloped her, and her rounded cheek and smooth brow bore no trace of repentance. She seemed to be oblivious of the evil which she had wrought in the life of her husband, and a smile of satisfaction curved her lips as she centred her mind upon the future and dwelt upon its promise. She saw herself the happy mother of a son—no Hindu mother ever allows herself to think of the possible but unwelcome daughter,—who was the centre of all eyes in that large household. In her vivid imagination he surpassed in beauty every other child that had ever been born to woman. He was Rama-given, and in appearance he was like the great god. He should be carried down to the big temple in the South, and there receive the name of the deity who had smiled upon his parents.

Then her vivid imagination carried her beyond the babyhood of the child. He grew up as straight and as strong as a

cocoa-nut palm. She could see him moving about the house, each member of the family vying with the other in indulging the young master and ministering to his pleasure. But before his boyhood was passed his marriage must be arranged. She would choose the girl herself. By that time her mother-in-law would be too infirm to hold the reins, and the ruling of domestic matters would devolve upon herself, or better still, perhaps the old lady would be dead. Fortunately for young wives their husbands' mothers could not live for ever. It was a fascinating picture, and the work of folding and putting away went on slowly, ceasing altogether at times when the day-dreams grew sharp and clear. Her whole mind was focussed upon the unborn child. Not a single thought was bestowed upon the husband who had failed to bring her into subjection ; for which reason she neither loved nor feared him.

Suddenly the sound of bullock-bells fell upon her ear, startling her from her dreams and scattering the bright visions that she had built up in her busy brain. The jewelled fingers that had been absently smoothing out a crease in the gold embroidery of one of the garments, paused, and her eyes were fastened upon the doorway of the entrance hall which she could see from the position she had taken up. Few people passed along that village road, and still fewer stopped at her father-in-law's house. Being a man of substance and a man of peace, neither the money-lender nor the lawyer—the most frequent visitors as a rule—troubled Doraswamy with calls.

As she gazed a gaunt figure entered, and, stopping on the threshold, looked round him as though searching for some one. His eyes fell upon her, and he strode forward with rapid steps, followed closely by his companion. She recognized her husband and Jaganath, and the blood forsook her face, her cheek paling to a delicate yellow. Onward he came across the courtyard with purposeful haste straight to the spot where she sat, too paralyzed with vague apprehension to rise or move or even shriek for help.

The deep-set eyes in the haggard countenance glared at her, like the eyes of some savage beast roused to the very

depths of its brutal passion. The fingers of his hands worked as though they already gripped the tender throat or grasped the handle of the deadly knife. The mild gentle husband, with soft European manners, whom she had known in Madura was gone. In his place there stood towering above her, a Hindu in whose eye burned the unmistakable fire of revenge. With a stifled cry of terror she cowered before him, shrinking visibly, as though the blows she momentarily expected were actually descending.

Jaganath did not leave her long in doubt as to her husband's intentions. Lending him his tongue—he would have given it outright had it been possible—he thundered forth the words which he believed that his cousin would have spoken.

"Woman! behold your work! it is the work of a devil, not of a wife! By your hand he was led on to the fate that has ruined his life. What should be the reward of such devilry? The knife! the knife!"

Lukshmi covered her eyes in terror and threw herself abjectly at their feet.

"Mercy! my lord! mercy!" she gasped, fear half paralyzing her tongue and rendering her for the moment almost as voiceless as her husband.

"Mercy! indeed!" echoed Jaganath, with angry scorn. "Had my cousin's wife any mercy when she followed that wicked one from the room and left the Afghan hakim and his assistant to do their worst?"

"I knew not their intention!" she sobbed.

He gave her no time to fabricate excuses but continued—

"There is no mercy for devils who delight in evil as the tiger of the jungle delights in destruction. With his own hand will your husband hack the flesh from your cheek, sever the nose from your face, the fingers from your hand and leave you scored with the marks of his wrath."

At the graphic description of her punishment, Lukshmi's voice returned and she screamed aloud, pouring forth a torrent of prayers to be spared such an awful fate.

The sound of their voices brought the occupants of the

kitchen upon the scene. The sight of the young master's haggard face with its threatening expression struck them with sudden alarm. Eager questions died away on their lips unuttered as they gazed upon the group. What was it? they whispered to each other. The curse? Could it have fallen at last; but how? The denunciations of Jaganath were incomprehensible; although she, the young mistress, trembling like the leaf of a peepul-tree at their feet, must have understood. What crime had the naughty one committed?

With eyes riveted upon Jaganath they watched his every movement. Drawing a sheathed knife from his belt he removed the leather cover. The brilliant sunshine caught the polished steel, which flashed ominously. A frightened exclamation from the assembled women caused Lukshmi to glance upwards. The gleam of the sharp edge struck deadly fear deep into her spirit and her tongue refused further utterance. Jaganath handed the knife to his cousin, saying—

“Now, my brother, let all see what is the reward of treachery. Do not spare her. She has ever been the curse of your life. Cut and score as you will but do not kill. Let her live to feel the far-reaching strength of an angry husband's arm.”

Rama Rajah took the weapon like a man who moved in some hideous nightmare in which he was being driven by evil spirits. With fingers gripping the handle he stood glowering down upon the shivering creature at his feet.

The news of his arrival had reached the ears of his mother in the garden. Throwing down the basket of pods she came in haste to give him greeting, entering the house by the kitchen. At the sight of him a cry escaped her lips. What had happened to cause that haggard expression, that fierce look in his eyes? What was the meaning of the knife and the grovelling of his wife at his feet?

“My son! my son!” she cried, advancing quickly with extended arms.

He turned and gazed at her but spoke no word. One of the women approached and whispered something in her ear. She started and screamed.

"The curse ! the swami's curse! it has fallen ! Aiyoh ! that I should live to see this evil day ! Tell me it is false ! Speak ! boy, speak !"

She addressed Jaganath with a pathetic mixture of command and entreaty, longing in vain for the words that should reassure her. But there was no comfort to be gathered from his speech.

"Mother ! it is so ; the curse has fallen ! He, your son, is stricken with silence !" cried Jaganath, his voice ringing through the hall. "And it is this cursed woman who has brought it upon him !"

With rapid tongue he told her the story of that terrible night ; of how Lukshmi had drawn her husband to the temple, knowing that she was leading him into the power of the guru ; of how the hakim had brought about the fulfilment of the curse. How he himself had waited at the station in obedience to her wishes, of his dream and the cry he had heard ; then of his walk through the famine-stricken country to the temple where he had found his cousin in the temple the following afternoon, sick to the very gate of death.

During the narration the little group of spectators had increased. With bated breath and rounded eyes they listened to the unfolding of the tale of Lukshmi's treachery. Their gaze, which at first had been fixed upon the speaker, dropped from his face to the prostrate figure, and an expression of surprise and horror clouded each brow. That the guru should have taken measures to accomplish his design and bring about the prophecy he had made in his wrath, did not astonish them. But that Rama Rajah's wife should join the swami and lend him her assistance in decoying her own husband on to his fate was abhorrent and repulsive to all. To none was it more so than to his mother. When she fully understood what had occurred, her eyes fell upon that shivering form with something of the loathing that she would have shown for a deadly serpent. It was not easy at first to realize the truth of what Jaganath asserted, and more than once the unhappy lady made heart-rending appeals to her son to speak, to utter one word and say

that the story was false. But as she grasped the fact, and comprehended the appalling truth of her daughter-in-law having gone to Karlipet with the full knowledge that the guru would be there, and with a shrewd suspicion that foul play of some sort was contemplated, her wrath rose in a storm of angry reproach, and her desire to punish was almost as strong as that which burned within the breasts of the two men.

"Do you understand what has been done, oh, mother of this house? Do you understand how his life has been ruined? Maimed as he is, he can no longer follow his profession and continue in the service of the Sirkar. The appointment to Tinnevelly, which you desired so much, is promised. The letter has come, saying that he shall have the post as soon as he is ready to take it. But what good is that now? The Sirkar needs men who have the use of their tongues. Him they will pension or perhaps dismiss. At this very moment might he be entering upon his new duties if it were not for that vile woman lying there. She has dashed the fruit from your lips and filled your mouth with rottenness. What shall be the reward of such a woman? How did our forefathers repay treachery in the zenana? Proceed, my brother! Do the work for which you have lived through all these evil hours, and then cast her aside for ever as one whose loathsomeness exceeds the loathsomeness of a widow."

As he concluded his inflammatory words, Rama Rajah bent over his wife, whilst the little assembly stood transfixed with apprehensive dismay. He seized her roughly by the arm. She struggled like a trapped cat, biting, scratching, and screaming as she sought to ward off the dreaded punishment. In the struggle her fingers brushed sharply across the razor-like edge of the knife, and the delicate flesh was deeply incised. The blood gushed from the wounds and flowed freely, staining the white muslin that enveloped her.

The sight of the blood struck a sudden chord within the brain of her assailant and pierced the heavy cloud of passion that rested upon him. A great wave of memory brought him to himself. Years ago he had seen Dolores with that same

kind of scarlet stream flowing from her fingers, and the white muslin robe she wore was patched with crimson spots. The knife, held without care at the dinner-table whilst he lent his eager help in her infirmity, came into contact with her fingers and the deed was done. For the moment he believed in his boyish dismay that he had killed her, and that she would bleed to death from the wounds which he had inflicted. An agony of mind had overwhelmed him, and he had abandoned himself to despair, until Mr. Avondean had sought him out and assured him with gentle seriousness that Dolores would not die. He remembered how he had crept, repentant and full of self-reproach for his carelessness, to her side; how he had caressed the poor fingers swathed in their bandages, and how sweetly she had forgiven him with many warnings to be careful never to cause the shedding of blood accidentally or wilfully. Her kind words came back upon him on the great, white, luminous wings of memory; and between the fainting form of his wife and his own fiery eyes shone the pale face of the guardian angel of his boyhood. The veil that recent events had cast over his mind was lifted. In spirit the sensitive Hindu, seeing clearly once more, stood face to face with his Western teaching, his hand upon the throat of that savage hereditary instinct, which lay deep within him ready to spring into activity and life at the relaxing of his grip.

The momentary pause gave Rama Rajah's mother the opportunity for interposing. She flung herself upon him.

“My son! She deserves punishment; but hold your hand! Do not strike!” she screamed, clasping her arms round him. “If you kill her, you kill your son!”

She felt the start of surprise that passed through him as her words fell on his ears.

“The gods have heard your cry and have given the boon we have so long craved.”

His burning eyes were fixed upon her face. She read—rightly or wrongly—a question in them that she answered immediately.

"The child is yours, given you by the smile of the great god Rama of Ramésaram. Ah ! had we only known it, there was no need to go to Karlipet, no need to lead you into the power of the guru. And she, that wicked one ! she too must have known that the gods had heard her prayer. But in her headstrong wilfulness she did not speak, because she desired to follow the call of the swami."

His eyes sought the figure of his wife now lying unconscious at his feet. The sight of the knife, the blood flowing in a warm stream down her arm, her manifest terror, the touch of his mother's arms in nervous restraint, all helped to restore the equilibrium he had for a time, through an intense sense of wrong, lost.

Again that wave of memory flooded his brain. He seemed to hear the voice of Dolores instead of the voice of his mother, crying to him to hold his hand, to leave vengeance behind him, and not brand himself with the murder of his offspring. The vision beckoned to him, held out the arms to which he had frequently flown for comfort and peace in his exiled boyhood. He forgot his infirmity of body ; he thought only of his wounded spirit, and he longed with a sudden and intense longing for the touch of the cool hands upon his brow. The tension of muscle and nerve relaxed ; the grip of his fingers upon the weapon loosened, and it fell to the ground. With an inarticulate cry he freed himself from his mother's embrace and turned away.

"Ah !" cried Jaganath, to whom her words had come with their full import. "For the sake of the unborn child he spares her."

Rama Rajah's mother signed to one of the women standing near to attend to the girl. Then, hurrying after her son, she laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"My son ! where would you go ? Come back into my room and rest," she said, glancing at him with maternal solicitude and affection. Her heart was sore, and smarted at the sight of the wreck of the man who was leaving her.

He paused in his slow movement towards the entrance of

the house, as though her appeal moved him acutely. But there was no softening of the stern lines about his mouth, no yearning for the comfort of her touch. The vision that had come to assist her entreaties to spare his wife remained bright and clear ; and the face of Dolores shone upon him out of the darkness, destroying for ever with its steadfast kindliness the cruel taunt with which Lukshmi had stabbed his heart as he lay helpless in the temple. Hate found no place in that gentle soul ; nothing but love and pity burned there. She called, and her call must be obeyed. As his mother repeated her entreaties he gave the sign of dissent which Jaganath read instantly.

“ He cannot stay. I, who have nursed him back to life, know what is in his mind. We depart ; and she, though she shall be the mother of his son, shall never be again his wife.”

“ Stay, my son ! stay ! We will punish that wicked one when the child is born. She shall be beaten and burned every day of her life if you will.”

Again the sign of dissent was given, and Jaganath interpreted what his cousin would say.

“ Punish her all you will ; she merits a life of punishment. But her husband goes, carrying with him his cursed and blighted life. He seeks only to hide his head where no one shall point the finger of scorn, at him and say, ‘ See, to what depths of misery a man may be brought by a wicked woman who is not kept in proper subjection.’ ”

Again Rama Rajah moved onwards in the direction of the street door where the bullocks waited. His mother gazed after him for a few seconds. Then, feeling that all further effort to detain him was useless, she drew her saree over her head and sought her room where she might weep out her grief.

Rama Rajah passed through the carved doorway and stood for a moment looking back at the home he was deliberately leaving for ever. Out in the courtyard, where he had learned as a child to walk, the brilliant sun shone down upon the glistening green fronds of the palms. The sparrows chirped merrily round the kitchen-door, and some

black rooks upon the tiles of the roof cawed as they watched greedily for the refuse cast from the back door into the garden.

Round the house, as far as eye could see, spread the rice fields, dotted with the snowy paddy-birds wading in the soft wet mud. In some parts the green blade had already sprung up, casting a semi-transparent mantle of delicate verdure over the soil. In others, the sheets of water, brought by the irrigating channels upon the freshly sown seed, gleamed in the sunlight like bands of polished silver. It was a picture full of promise, and it had rejoiced the heart of Doraswamy as he went forth on his morning walk of pleasure. It was a picture that would have rejoiced the heart of his son, had not his soul been seared by the hot iron of malice and his spirit broken by pain. But the salve for his wounds was not to be found in those broad, smiling acres. It awaited him on the blue hills towards which he set his face. He turned his back on his home, his wife, his parents, and pressed forward to reach the only medicine that would bring him healing, the medicine of life, a true friend.

The jingling of the bullocks' bells died away in the distance. His mother and her women listened with sinking hearts. Then, bowing their heads, a wail of sorrow was sent up from the smiling Hindu homestead as the son of the house passed out of their lives.

CHAPTER XXIX

A MEETING IN THE SHOLAH

BROKEN caste was preferable in the eyes of Sobraon Rao's daughter to a broken heart. Once more she was eating food—no longer cruelly spiced with pepper—prepared by pariah servants ; and drinking tea with the casteless aliens who ruled India. Without the aid of her English education, and the spirit of independence it had fostered, she would have preferred a broken heart, with death at the bottom of a well, to a broken caste. But her training in the West had lifted her above the prejudices of her nation, and she was enjoying life on the hills in Miss Avondean's society with all the zest of an English maiden. She chased away trouble and care, and devoted herself to the blind lady.

In her own home care was not so easily cast to the winds. When in course of time her mother learned that her daughter was safe and happy with her English friends, her grief was changed to anger, and she was more disturbed in spirit than when she had thought that she was dead. Death was honourable, even if compassed by suicide or homicide, and it brought no disgrace. But the course taken by her wilful daughter overwhelmed the whole family in shame. She dared not show her face to any one lest the finger of scorn should be pointed at her as the mother of an outcaste. In the privacy of the zenana she vilified the foreigners, who had encouraged such behaviour and been the cause of the trouble.

Her first act was to demand the restitution of her daughter unconditionally. It would have gone hard indeed with the poor child if this had been carried out. Fortunately a telegram

came from Cairo in answer to Veerama's letter of explanation, which sanctioned her absence from the parental roof. It was addressed to Miss Avondean, and in it Sobraon Rao asked her to be good enough to take up the guardianship of his daughter until he was able to receive her. To Veerama he wrote regretting the necessity of the step she had taken, but refraining from uttering a word of blame. He was wise enough to understand that his wife must have been in the wrong ; and that though personal violence had perhaps not been offered, there had been some system of persecution employed, rendering life unendurable and driving his daughter into desperation. With his advanced and practical views, he rejoiced that it had resulted in flight and not in the taking of her own life.

As he sat in the luxurious hotel in Cairo, served with food that was not cooked by a Shanar cook, the breaking of caste rules seemed of little importance. Could his wife have seen him sipping the fragrant coffee brought by the Egyptian servant, she would have been filled with horror. He smiled as he thought of her, and when he had finished his coffee and cigarette, he wrote a letter, bidding her leave matters as they were until he had time and opportunity to attend to them.

The baffled mother groaned in spirit and hid her head in the privacy of the zenana, prophesying evil things for her foolish family. Her daughter-in-law spent many weary hours trying to coax her husband's mother into a better humour. The young arms ached from their self-imposed task of massage, and the spirit was weary of the dulness that reigned within the house.

Once only did the wife of Sobraon Rao venture out, and then it was with every venetian of the carriage windows closed. It was not a journey of pleasure, but of inquiry that she took. She drove to the house of the Collector, accompanied by her sister-in-law, and stormily cross-questioned the butler upon the occurrences of the morning when Veerama disappeared. He was as imperturbable as ever, denying that he had given the lady any assistance in either money or clothes. He had merely fulfilled his orders and handed her the key. Her companion

could tell her that he did not go near the Missie until the lady sent him upstairs to inquire how soon the Missie would be ready to return home.

He gave no hint of the registered letter, containing notes and instructions, which he dropped into the box just before Veerama arrived to search for the fur coat. Nor did he mention the dark dress, dust cloak, shawl, and other articles of wearing apparel, which had been hastily made into a bundle, and which he, himself, had smuggled into the carriage with the parcel for the post, and hidden under the rug at Veerama's feet. Of the frantic stripping off of the saree and the donning of the enveloping cloak and shawl, of the noiseless opening of the brougham door on the street side, and swift mingling with the crowd, whilst the coachman and syce were absorbed in their conversation, the butler knew nothing. Sobraon Rao's wife scolded and lamented, reproaching the butler vaguely, as she had blamed the coachman, and syce, and her relative.

But the racket of a woman's tongue in Indian ears counts for no more than the whirring of the cicala in the grass. To stop it is impossible, and it must run on, like the grinding of the grass-hopper, until it comes to an end of itself. The butler heard her patiently to the end ; and when the angry lady had finished, he moved down the verandah steps, and pushing aside the syce, opened the carriage door with his own hands, salaaming respectfully as she stepped in followed by her companion. He closed the door with a bang, and in a loud tone ordered the coachman to drive the wife of his excellency, Sobraon Rao, Sundror, back to her house. The rolling out of the title soothed the afflicted woman, and when she reached home she was feeling all the better for the breeze she had had with the butler. Her attention was presently diverted from her troubles by her daughter-in-law, who began to show signs of grief at the protracted absence of her young husband. At convenient moments the diplomatic child-wife suggested that, as there was to be no wedding at present, it would be a good opportunity to go to Bombay and join Desika. The proposal met with the approval of the elder lady ; and consolation was found in the

preparations for the journey, and the pleasant anticipation of making a suitable home for the son and heir of the prosperous tobacco merchant.

Meanwhile the rebellious daughter of the house was rapidly recovering her natural joyousness in the society of Dolores. The old life was resumed with almost the same routine, and Veerama read aloud indoors, or guided the footsteps of the blind lady upon the hill-paths, lending her eyes to see the beauties of mountain and vale as they walked. Dolores had a great love for trees ; and her favourite haunt was the old sholah, where the forest giants still stood in their hoary clothing of russet mosses and grey lichen, and with their crowns of thick foliage lifted high into the blazing sunlight. Their feet were buried in a tangle of ferns and creepers, brambles and wild laurel, with here and there a graceful tree-fern lifting its plumes above the jungly undergrowth. Her acute sense of environment enabled her to feel the difference of sunshine and shade, apart from the heat of the sun's rays, as she wandered beneath the spreading branches. She could smell the blossom on the bough and the moss upon the woody stems. But most charming of all, she could hear the wind in the leaves and the voices of the shy birds that were hidden in the woodland depths.

“A tree has so many ways of speaking to me and making itself known, but the mountains are silent,” she said, as she lingered in the forest one morning.

“Do our Indian trees say the same as the trees of England?” asked Veerama.

“There is a difference ; yes, I can feel it. The wind is higher up, and its voice is further away. These trees must be much taller than those we have at home.”

“So they are ; their stems are longer. Step aside, Loree ; two riders are coming towards us.”

Veerama led her to the bank that bordered the way, where the graceful silver fern fringed the edge of the jungle, and she placed her safely beyond the reach of passing hoofs.

“Who are they?” asked Dolores.

"One is Colonel Blessington ; the other I have not seen here before. But we know him. It is Captain Ravellion."

The riders pulled up ; and Blessington, a genial, cheery Englishman of the sociable Anglo-Indian type, addressed his conversation to Miss Avondean. Ravellion, recognizing Veerama, at once edged his horse nearer to her, and gave the grass no time to grow beneath his feet. Where was she staying ? How did she like the hills ? How was her father ? Oh yes ! he remembered him. Gone to Egypt, was he ? Ah ! good man ; that was the kind of progressiveness that was wanted in the country, instead of the shouting from the congress platforms. He was putting his back into developing the resources of the country in the proper way.

"But forgive me, Miss Veerama, if I am too inquisitive ; I understood that you had separated yourself from the contaminating society of the English, and had retired into the zenana to be married. How is it that I have the pleasant surprise of finding you here ?"

"My—my engagement is broken off."

"Veerama, we must be walking home or the sun will be too hot," interrupted Dolores, who had caught Ravellion's question.

"I may come and call upon you, Miss Avondean," he inquired with some eagerness, adding, "and upon you too, Miss Veerama ?"

At this moment two girls issued from the sholah by a steep mountain track, which wound through a ravine clothed with a miniature forest of tree-ferns. They paused a moment as if in surprise, and glanced sharply at Ravellion. He was leaning from his saddle towards Veerama, his handsome face alight with amusement, possibly mischief. One of the girls approached the quartette in the road and the Colonel greeted her at once.

"Hallo ! Belle ! Where have you sprung from ?"

"From the sholah, father ; Miss Eden and I have been sketching," she answered, as she bowed distantly to Ravellion, shook hands with Dolores and stared at Veerama.

Ravellion gathered up the reins saying that he must

be off as he had an appointment; at which the Colonel exclaimed—

“You’re coming in to lunch with us, are you not?”

“Sorry, very kind of you to ask me, but I’m afraid I can’t manage it. Expect me to-morrow, Miss Avondean. Good-bye, Miss Veerama; I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you too, when I pay my call.”

Listing his hat to include the whole party in his farewell, he trotted off, and was soon lost to sight round the bend of the road.

“Didn’t know that you and Ravellion had met before,” remarked the Colonel, as the clatter of the horse’s hoofs died away in the distance.

“He paid us a visit once at Maidenhead and we met him again at Madura,” she answered.

“He has been stationed with us for the last four months and we have seen a great deal of him. Well, I too must be off. Time we were all at home. The sun blazes down hot after the rain. Belle, you had better be getting home too.”

The party dispersed, Belle and her companion going towards Pambur House, which her father had taken for the season, and Dolores retracing her steps towards Mayflower House.

“Miss Blessington is a very pretty girl,” observed Veerama, as they moved along the shaded road at a leisurely pace. “She has the colour of the rain-lily in her cheeks. But I do not think that she was pleased to-day.”

“Perhaps she was tired or had been disappointed with her sketch.”

“I think she was angry.”

“Angry! Who could have made her angry?”

“Captain Ravellion. They took no notice of each other, yet each seemed to know what the other was doing and saying all the time; and while he leaned forward and talked to me she looked—oh! so annoyed! What did it mean, Loree?”

“I cannot tell, dear. These are the moments when I want my own eyes, and other people’s are of no use to me.”

"I hope that I did not give offence," said the gentle Veerama.

Dolores assured her that such a thing was impossible, and hazarded a guess that perhaps Miss Blessington and Captain Ravellion had quarrelled.

"Is her father trying to marry her to Captain Ravellion against her will?" asked Veerama, mindful of her own mother and her methods.

Dolores laughed as she explained that those kind of matters were left to the young people to arrange, as Veerama must know by this time, after having lived in England and read so many English stories.

"It is more likely that there is a coolness between them, and that they have no kind friend to explain things and bring them together again. Belle has lost her mother and is an only child, so she has no one to help her."

"It must be very strange arranging one's own marriage. I do not see how it can be done without a little assistance," remarked Veerama, presently.

"Some assistance is needed, but not until they have discovered that they like each other. Then, if the parents approve, they do all they can to smooth the way."

"I feel sure that Colonel Blessington would like to help Captain Ravellion. He invited him to lunch."

"But the invitation was refused very decidedly."

"Miss Loree, do English ladies ever propose marriage to the gentlemen?"

"They are not supposed to do so. It is the custom for the girl to wait for the man to speak."

"But if for some reason he is afraid to ask?"

"Then he probably pays the penalty of his want of courage."

Veerama was silent and preoccupied the rest of the way. With the peculiar adaptability of the Hindu she was ready, like her father, to consider Western ways. Her mother's system of making marriages was destructive to happiness in her own case, though it might not be so with Desika. Was

it possible that she would be permitted to make a choice for herself? With the faintest little sigh she put the alluring dream aside, as she said to herself that it was an easy matter for the English girl; there were no restrictions of caste to come between her and the man of her choice.

Imprisonment within the house was of short duration on the hills. By three o'clock it was safe to venture out under the shade of the Eucalyptus, where tea was served later. After tea Dolores expressed a wish to go round Coaker's walk returning by the road. There was an attraction in that particular route which she would not have acknowledged even to herself. The great wide map of the plains, spreading from the foot of the mountains below the cliff, contained the town that was associated with Rama Rajah. It is true that she could not see it, but the knowledge that it was there with all its memories of his voice and companionship seemed to bring him nearer. At times she longed to hear him speak, to feel the touch of his hand and to lay her own hand upon his head. His continued silence puzzled her. Various reasons suggested themselves to her mind for his conduct, but none of them were satisfactory. He had been ill, and she was aware that the short privilege leave had been changed into furlough. Newent had heard rumours of an illness and had sent the news to his wife. The illness might have prevented him from writing for a time, but presumably he was convalescent by now and could have sent her a few lines, if only to thank her for what she had done in procuring the promise of the appointment desired by his family. Her old friend, the friend also of her father, had used his influence at headquarters with effect, and had told her of his good service. It was difficult to be patient under the long protracted silence; and when the heart wearied a little more than usual for news that did not come, she found comfort in turning her face to the plains, breathing a prayer that all might be well with the man she held dearest on earth.

Led by Veerama, Dolores trod the path on the edge of the cliff and rested, as was her custom, upon the boulder in its

bed of bracken. When the sun touched the horizon they rose to depart, strolling slowly homewards by the road where the walking was easier in the rapidly falling darkness. The glory of the afterglow faded and changed with magical rapidity to the weird deathly grey. The vivid purples deepened to inky neutral tints, that lay black against the cool lemon of the sky.

The visitors to Kodaikanal were gathered at this hour at the Club. Dolores and her companion had the road to themselves except for an occasional coolly returning from delivering his load. The breeze had died down with the setting of the sun, and nature was sinking into the quietude of night. Birds twittered sleepily in the branches of the wattle preparatory to settling to roost, and the butterflies, suspicious of coming rain, crept deep into the shelter of the thick jungle.

A single horseman approached, riding wearily upon a tired horse. Veerama linked her arm more closely in that of Dolores and guided her to the side of the road. They were walking eastward; the traveller was facing west, and his features were lighted up by the pallid light that had succeeded the rosy afterglow of the sunset.

Veerama gazed up into the face as he passed, and her heart stood still. The face was gaunt and emaciated, and the sunken eyes dwelt upon hers with an indescribable sadness in which was mingled great astonishment. It was like some one she knew, yet unlike—the mere shadow of a well-remembered face, the dead aftermath of the living glow that had faded.

The rider gave no other sign of recognition as his horse plodded by with heavy dragging feet, nor did a word of greeting escape his lips. On he went never turning to look behind, nor to respond to the involuntary cry, half gasp, half exclamation, that came from Veerama.

"What is the matter? Have you stepped on a thorn?" asked Dolores.

"It was nothing," replied Veerama hastily, as she resumed her walk.

"Something startled you; did you see a snake?"

She endeavoured to reassure her companion, feeling instinctively that it would be best to say nothing of the apparition lest she should have been mistaken. But Dolores was not so easily put off, and with the quickness of one who was blind she associated the start of surprise with the sound of the horse's hoofs.

"You are trembling, child; you have had a fright. Who passed on horseback just now?"

"A native."

"And you recognized him!" Then, as Veerama did not reply, she continued, "You need have no fear that you will be taken from us here and sent back to your mother. I have your father's consent, and am your guardian, appointed by him until he claims you at my hands. If it were Desika, himself, who came to demand you, he would have no authority to remove you from my keeping."

They continued their homeward walk; and Veerama recovered her self-possession as she listened, thankful that Dolores was self-deceived and free from suspicion. It was not fear but horror that had forced the cry from her lips. The sight of that deathlike face, which she felt with increasing conviction belonged to no other than Rama Rajah, appalled her. It was not the Rama Rajah she had known, the refined handsome Vellalan who had courteously done his best to conquer the inherited contempt that he felt for the Shanar and had succeeded almost too well. It was the dreadful ghost of the beloved image that she cherished in her heart, a phantom of pain and despair, that gazed down upon her from his saddle with sorrow-stricken eyes. What could have happened to have brought him to this? Fever might have reduced him, or cholera have caused the emaciation. But neither of these could plant that terrible despair in the eyes that met hers.

For the rest of the evening Veerama was very silent; and more than once Dolores, believing that she was still troubled about her safety, reassured her on that point. At night, when she retired to her room, the gaunt vision returned in the

darkness, and a shudder ran through her. Some calamity must have befallen him, some terrible blow must have been dealt that had struck at the spirit as well as the body. What could have happened to him?

She fell into a troubled sleep after a long period of wakefulness. In her sleep it seemed as though Rama Rajah changed places with Ravellion. Leaning forward from the saddle, the eyes gazed into hers with an unspoken entreaty, and gaunt arms opened to clasp her to him. With unaccountable repugnance she shrank back, screaming to Dolores to protect her; and with the cry she awoke to hear the voice of the lark as it rose from the bracken on the mountain into the opalescent sky of the dawn.

CHAPTER XXX

THE MEETING

AGAIN there was rain in the night, but the soft white clouds that brooded on the face of the mountains rolled away at dawn. The ground dried rapidly; and the sun and breeze together quickly freed the vegetation of its mantle of glistening drops. There was no such thing as a muddy road or flooded path. The rain as it fell ran off at once to join the impetuous river, that tore its way along the boulder-strewn bed towards the edge of the cliff from which it leaped to the plains.

It was Dolores' custom to walk every morning and sometimes again in the afternoon. But if kept at home by callers who stayed to tea, she was well-content to remain under the blue-gum with Veerama, whilst Miss Beauchamp accompanied Mrs. Newent to the Club or to a tennis party at the house of some friend. Occasionally Dolores was tempted to go too, but as Veerama was rarely included in the invitation she usually refused. Seated under the gum-tree with the pink rain-lilies round her, she enjoyed the undivided attention of her companion, who read aloud or lent her eyes to see the sky and flowers, the distant hills, the golden wattle, the brilliant butterflies, and the restless birds ever busy foraging for their hungry nestlings.

It was here that Captain Ravellion found them, in the afternoon of the day following their meeting in the sholah, when he fulfilled his promise of calling. Instead of being ushered formally into the house, he was met by Veerama, who asked him to join them under the tree.

"Mrs. Newent and Miss Beauchamp have gone to the

Club," she explained as she led the way. "And Miss Avondean and I are spending a lazy afternoon in the garden."

She bade him tread carefully over the turf so as not to crush the flowers.

"What a glorious sight they are!" he answered.

"Not more beautiful than the daffodils of England."

"Nature on these Indian hills is so lavish and extravagant, and somehow extravagance appeals to me, especially when it is joined to generosity. If I had the means I should like to deal out favours as liberally as these blossoms have been scattered. I can scarcely get along the road for my desire to stop and gaze at colours thrown broadcast on all sides. Even the gardens are overflowing, and the petals of the roses fall at my feet in the road as I stroll along under the fences."

For fully half an hour he sat chatting with them, and sharing the tea which was brought out presently. With ready tact he drew Veerama into the conversation, setting her completely at her ease. He made her laugh and respond to his sallies, until she could have fancied herself back in the rose-garden at Maidenhead among the good-natured Englishmen who had no prejudices against oriental blood.

"It is very good of you, Miss Avondean," he said, after the tea had been leisurely disposed of, "to receive me in this friendly fashion. I ought to have called in the middle of the day, but the afternoon is so much pleasanter when one has to walk or ride. I must be moving on, as I have promised to go and see a friend who lives at one of the houses on the other side of your garden over there."

He pointed to a roof just appearing among the trees.

"There is a path running through our garden and our neighbours', that will take you straight there," said Veerama, as she looked at the building indicated.

"But I shall be trespassing if I go that way," objected Ravellion. "I had better go round by the road."

"Show him the way, Veerama, and then he need have no scruples," suggested Dolores.

He bade her farewell, and they strolled down the hillock at an easy pace towards the garden path, walking side by side.

"Captain Ravellion, you asked me about my marriage yesterday," said Veerama, as they drew out of hearing of Dolores.

"Yes; have you any news to tell me?" he said, with a smile. The pretty Hindu girl interested him.

"None at all; but I want to ask you about your own."

"Mine!" he exclaimed in astonishment, and not without some embarrassment.

"Yes, yours. Is it not fair for me to question you as you questioned me?"

He was at a loss for a reply. The inquiry was audacious, but the manner in which it was put was so simple that he could not take offence. After a few moments' hesitation the humour of the situation struck him, and it pleased his fancy to pursue his little interrogator's line of thought.

"Of course it is fair, quite fair. What do you want to know about my marriage, Miss Veerama?"

"You would like to marry Miss Blessington, and I——"

"The deuce!" murmured Ravellion.

"——And I can see that her father is ready to make the necessary arrangements."

There was a pause as they threaded their way down a path where the broad strong leaves of the brilliant Canna had invaded the walk, leaving room for only one to pass. Veerama hung back and Ravellion strode forward in an absent-minded manner. Suddenly he stopped and turned to face her where a vigorous bush of scarlet Fuchsia shouldered the Canna aside.

"Since you know so much, Miss Veerama, perhaps you can tell me how the lady herself regards the affair?" he said.

"She is very angry," she replied with conviction, "angry and proud, because she loves you so much."

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "Go on, you little witch," he added, his curiosity as well as his interest aroused.

"I am not a witch ; I have neither black cat, nor broomstick, nor seething caldron, like the old women in Macbeth. But I have my eyesight, and could see that Miss Blessington was very angry because you leaned forward in your saddle yesterday and looked at me with kind eyes."

He laughed with genuine amusement. The shrewd observation and frank simplicity of his mentor was not without its charm.

"So she was angry with me, was she ?" he repeated softly.
"What do you infer from that, may I ask ?"

"That you occupy her thoughts and her heart. If she felt just like one of your friends, me, for instance, or Miss Avondean, would she be annoyed with you for being kind to another ? Ah ! Captain Ravellion, you don't know what a number of tales we have in the zenana about jealousy, and all the mischief it causes. We, Hindus, are not only jealous of deeds and words, but of looks and thoughts. Many a husband beats his wife because he believes that she thinks about another man who is younger and handsomer than himself. And there are women who put poison in their husband's food because the men's eyes wander beyond their own houses."

He plucked absently at the tassels of the Fuchsia, and crowned the tips of his fingers with the purple cups, as he stood looking down upon the little match-maker. His face had lost its expression of careless amusement in the serious contemplation of a matter that lay nearer to his heart than he was quite aware of.

"She has no business to be angry. It is I who should be annoyed," he declared, after a short silence.

"But why ?" asked Veerama, in surprise.

Again there was a pause. An explanation involved a certain amount of confidence which a few minutes ago he had no thought of offering. The situation was so peculiar, so utterly without precedent, that with all his prejudices against the darker race he was unable to regain his self-possession. Giving himself up to the strange fascination of having the

attention and sympathy of this pretty little Hindu lady, he plunged and made a clean breast of it.

“To tell you the truth, a fortnight ago I began to ask the lady we are speaking about if she—if she would be my wife. But she left me abruptly before I could finish, and walked away.”

“That was very sweet and proper of her.”

“Sweet, do you call it? I thought it very rude,” he said, with some heat.

“When girls of my nation are first told that they must marry, and that a man is chosen for them, they shed tears and declare that they do not wish to leave their home. Afterwards, when the older women have described how handsome and strong the bridegroom is, they dry their tears and say that the will of the gods must be done. But it is still only right and proper that the eyes should be lowered, and the lips silent when his name is mentioned. Underneath the shyness, if the bridegroom is well chosen and suitable, there is joy; although it would be improper to show it. Perhaps, as Miss Blessington has no mother she thinks it right to be shy.”

“You declared that she was angry.”

“That is doubtless because you have said nothing more. When the second opportunity came to speak you were being kind to another girl. It was impossible to mistake the glance she cast at me.”

“If she cared for me as you are inclined to believe, Miss Veerama, she would not be friendly with other people.”

“Other gentlemen?”

“Well, yes,” he reluctantly admitted.

“Oh! then you are jealous too! You must make haste if there are other gentlemen, and be quick with the betrothal. After the betrothal she will understand that you are in earnest, and that you will hit—punch do you call it—the other men if they pay her too much attention.”

Ravellion's laugh rang out in real amusement, and the cloud that was gathering on his brow was dispersed. The Fuchsia buds and blossoms suffered still more in his unconscious hands as he asked—

"But what if she won't listen?"

"No, it is not like that. You do not understand. You have no time to read the stories which Miss Avondean loves to hear. It is always near the end that the betrothal comes. This is what you must do, and all will be well. First buy a ring with large sparkling diamonds, since she is angry. Then you must contrive to find her by herself at the picnic, or after the tennis-party, or as she goes home in the twilight—anywhere will do as long as you are alone."

"And then?"

"You approach quickly before she can fly, and put your arms round her—they all do that in the books—telling her that you love her far beyond all other women. Anger flies, and she allows you to slip the ring upon her finger. That is your English ceremony of betrothal. It is not in the least like ours," she added, with a little sigh.

"Is there anything more that is necessary?" he asked.

"Afterwards you explain, taking no notice of her shyness, and you ask if she will marry you."

"A superfluous question by that time, I should imagine."

"Then you need not ask it. You must find out if she has been angry only through jealousy, or whether a woman has said evil things of you behind your back. With us there are so many tale-bearers who delight in turning joy to sorrow."

"It seems to me that there is very little difference in human nature whether it is white or brown, Miss Veerama," said Ravellion, thoughtfully.

"Did you think that the women of India could not feel joy and pain, love and hate, like the women of England? How little you guess what goes on behind the purdah!"

Something in her tone banished the light smile from his lips, and caused him to glance at the delicate mobile face with a sudden forgetfulness of his own troubles. Was it possible that tragedy had already touched that young life?

"I hope that you will find the course of love run smoothly when your turn comes," he said with earnestness.

"It will be as the gods will it. There is your way through

the opening in the rose hedge. Cross the road and you will find the gate of the garden of your friend's house."

As Veerama departed with Ravellion, to act as his guide, Dolores leaned back in the rustic seat and raised her face to the warm scent-laden air of the afternoon. The south-west wind swept through the scimitar-shaped foliage of the Eucalyptus with a murmur that rose and fell in cadences with the strength of the breeze. Now and then an aromatic leaf dropped, or a shred of ragged bark was swung across her lap. She had forgotten Veerama and her visitor ; her thoughts had taken wing to the plains, and were hovering like a flock of gentle doves over the friend who had been so long silent. When the hot weather was over, would it be possible, she wondered, to seek him out in his own home in Tinnevelly ?

It was strange how the birds and butterflies instinctively recognized her inability to hurt them. A small mountain-blue fluttered over her dress, attracted by the flowers that she held in her motionless hands, and a thrush boldly foraged for insects in the grass at her feet.

A footstep crushed the gravel on the path below and stopped at the front door. She heard the faint sound of the electric bell that summoned the servant, and listened idly for the voice. Was it a lady or a gentleman, and did the visitor wish to see Mrs. Newent or herself ? The sound of the servant's voice was wasted faintly on the breeze as he explained that Mrs. Newent was out, and directed the caller to the spot where Miss Avondean was sitting. She could catch neither bass nor treble to indicate the sex of the visitor.

The steps pursued the path to the foot of the hillock and then turned off into the grass among the lilies towards her. Dolores remained in the same position, her face towards the foliage where the breeze sang. As the footsteps drew nearer crushing the pink blossoms ruthlessly, she raised herself slightly and exclaimed—

“Who is there ?”

There was no answer, and she leaned forward repeating her question more sharply. The stranger stopped before her ; and

looking into the beautiful sightless eyes, a spasm of pain, acute and sudden, passed over his features, as Rama Rajah realized the barrier which had risen between him and the friend of his youth. In another second he had dropped upon his knees before her. She felt her hands seized, and pressed to hot lips.

“Who is it?” she cried again, hoarsely, and her breath caught in painful gasps. “Speak! Is it really you, Rama Rajah, at last?”

Swiftly the fingers, escaping from his grasp, passed over his face and head. She could not be mistaken, and a little cry of joy told him that she had recognized him.

“It is Rama Rajah, come at last! Where have you been all this time? At Tinnevelly? And why have you not written to me?”

Still there was no answer, and the head that had been lifted to gaze with eager yearning at the familiar features of his old friend, drooped lower and lower over his hands that were locked upon her lap in a clasp of agony. Putting her fingers beneath his chin she raised his head forcibly, and touched the sunken cheeks and eyes with eager inquiry.

“Ah! you have been ill, you are thin, and your cheeks are hollow. What has been the matter, Rama Rajah?”

His sole answer was an inarticulate groan.

“I cannot understand your silence. Is it something too terrible to speak of, something that you cannot find words for? You were never before like this, Rajah. You were always ready to tell me everything. Speak,” she implored him, “speak! I am longing to hear your voice again!”

A convulsive sob shook his frame as he knelt before her. She laid her hands upon his shoulders in sudden dread.

“What is it? Tell me!” she whispered, as the blood forsook her face in an agony of vague apprehension.

He caught her hand as it began to travel once again over his features in her vain attempt to solve the mystery, and laid his lips against it, holding it there whilst he gathered his courage to reveal the dreadful secret of his silence. Then opening his

lips he allowed her sensitive fingers to pass into the terrible cavern.

There was silence. Slowly comprehension came through those sensitive digits, and she learned the reason of his muteness. With a little cry, like some tender creature under the piercing knife, Dolores sank back limp and nerveless.

Glancing up Rama Rajah sprang to his feet and caught her in his arms. Dolores had fainted.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE TOBACCO MERCHANT'S RETURN

SOBRAON RAO's visit to Egypt was productive of good results and his business terminated satisfactorily in every way. He reached Bombay in the month of September with the intention of sending an agent, as soon as he could find one, who would open an office in Cairo to import the Indian grown leaf. He was met by his son, whose trip to the big cities of the North had also resulted in a satisfactory extension of the trade, an extension which Desika would himself develop from Bombay.

"You don't object to living here, my son?" asked Sobraon, as he entered the luxurious home which Desika had created for himself on Malabar Hill.

"Not at all. It is a great city, greater far than Madras in importance, and with a stronger political influence. I am proud to reckon myself among its citizens."

"Are you taking any part in the politics of the place?" asked Sobraon Rao, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I am devoted to the cause," replied Desika, his face lighting up with excitement. "It is my chief recreation, my way of amusing myself, as the English amuse themselves with their games, tennis, golf, and cricket. I made a great speech last week at a large gathering of politicians who assembled to welcome the Indian Member of Parliament; he, who speaks so strongly on the iniquity of sending our revenues to England merely to keep up an idle and expensive secretariat."

"I hope you explained matters clearly."

"I did, indeed! and inveighed against the waste of India's

substance and the rank robbery of the country," replied Desika, warmly.

"Robbery is scarcely the correct term. What I meant was this? did you point out how easily we might remedy the state of affairs, and how it was possible that you, yourself, could assist in keeping the revenues in the country."

"I!" exclaimed Desika, in surprise. "I do not propose to take any action. My mission is the mission of the pioneer, to preach and to expose the evils of our constitution. How could I, as an individual, remedy the deplorable drain on the wealth of India which is going on yearly before our very eyes?"

"Of course you are aware," replied his father, quietly, "that the expenses of the secretariat absorb but a small fraction of the revenues of India. The greater part of the money sent to England is to pay the interest—and a very moderate interest it is too—on capital lent to the country to develop its resources for the benefit of its inhabitants. The capitalists out here have only to buy up the sterling stock, and the revenues would for the greater part find their way into our pockets." With a sly smile he added, "I have often thought that it was incumbent on me, as your father, to put into practice some of the more reasonable changes which you seem by your denunciations to desire so earnestly. Some of my crores of rupees ought surely to be devoted to this object if I wish to do my duty to my country, and I ought to buy all the Government paper that I can possibly afford. Of course it would lessen my income to a quarter of what it is, but, as the father of a patriotic politician, there is no question as to the propriety of putting into practice the theories that you enunciate from the platform."

Desika's face was a picture; and Sobraon watched his son with eyes in which shone a keen sense of humour. The spirit of the trader was, after all, stronger in the young man than the spirit of the politician, and he exclaimed in genuine alarm—

"Put our money into rupee-paper! We should get barely four per cent. for it! It would be sheer madness!"

"As far as I am concerned," said Sobraon, smoothly, "of course I should prefer to keep it in tobacco, where I am certain of fifteen to twenty per cent, and I am more than content that our country should accept the capital of the foreigner. It is you who are discontented, and would have things altered."

"Indeed you make a mistake. I am not advocating any alteration at present. My mission is to point out the imperfections of our rulers, and to bring our grievances before the public eye."

Sobraon smiled again, although his son saw no humour in the matter.

"Then you think that things had better be left as they are?"

"Most decidedly," rejoined Desika, eagerly. "The time is not ripe for action. We must gather our strength and energies, whilst the land is living in peace. Then, when the moment arrives for striking, the arm of India will be the arm of a giant, against which resistance will be useless."

"Dogs must continue to bark and politicians to roar as long as they exist, and if you are content, I will not trouble myself further at present about taking steps for the retention of our revenues. What else had your friend from England to say?"

"He applauded our great Congress. It has a world-wide renown, and he assured us that in it lay the foundation of self-government."

"Did he recommend you to organize it into a constituted body? or did he leave you to suppose that self-government could be evolved from nothing more than a loose annual meeting such as the Congress is at present?"

"He spoke on far higher and broader ground than that. The time has not arrived for us to trouble ourselves about detail. He advocates self-government, such as the British colonies possess," said Desika, loftily.

"Has he brought with him any scheme for making the different religions and castes of India live peaceably side by

side under self-government, with the promise of consideration for the good of the community instead of the good of the individual?"

"I have told you already, father, that he does not trouble about detail. All that kind of thing must follow when we have proved conclusively to our rulers that their system is one of selfish oppression and misrule. Meanwhile, look at the glorious opportunities which offer themselves to a man with my gift of speech by the situation. I assure you that I made a great impression upon the immense crowd, many of whom were puffed up with arrogance and caste pride when they learned that I was a Shanar. There were one or two who had the impertinence to leave the hall, making as much noise as they could to show their contempt for one of lower caste than themselves. Such men need the touch of a stout bamboo, and if it were not for our overbearing rulers they would assuredly get their deserts. However, in spite of the interruption, I managed to hold my audience to the end, and I received the public thanks of the meeting and the congratulations of our honoured visitor himself."

Sobraon Rao let his eyes rest upon his son for a few seconds with amusement and then went on to other topics. Veerama's action was discussed, and presently Sobraon said—

"It was unwise of your mother to do anything in the matter of making a marriage until I returned."

"I assure you that no punishments were used. My mother was anxious to accomplish the business, so that she might be free to come to Bombay and manage my house for me."

"I know the zenana and its methods, and, though no actual punishments were used, life was made insupportable to the poor child. If there had been no Miss Avondean I am afraid it would have been the well."

"What are you going to do about Veerama's marriage?"

"Follow the example of your Congress men. For the present I shall consider the matter on broad lines, and not trouble about details."

He spoke seriously, and Desika had no suspicion that his

father was making fun of him. The position of the young politician of the present day is so important and momentous in his own eyes that there is no room for ridicule.

"It is a pity that we cannot get her married. I have done my best, and my mother has tried hard."

"Let me have a try next time. Perhaps I shall be able to manage it."

Desika glanced at his father in some surprise as he replied, "I only hope that you may be successful. It is high time she became a wife and a mother." Then he passed on to matters more closely concerning himself, and invited his father to look round the house. "I hope you approve of the furniture of the rooms," he said complacently, as he glanced round at the beautiful chairs, lounges, tables, cabinets, pictures, mirrors, tapestry, and the pianola that adorned the fine reception room where they had been sitting.

"It is all admirable and of the best English make, I observe," said Sobraon Rao, thoughtfully. "I thought that you were an advocate of the *swadeshi* movement, which boycotts all English goods."

"So I am," replied Desika, hastily. "Do I not preach it from the platform? It was not before I had searched the native shops and bazaars from end to end for what I wanted, without finding a single article to please me, that I was driven to purchase these English-made goods. I have denounced the slowness and stupidity of our native tradesmen at more than one meeting in this very town, because they do not supply the superior articles. The goods which they place in the market are inferior rubbish. No self-respecting gentleman of means can tolerate them. I preached *swadeshi* to the merchants themselves, and urged them to lose no time in manufacturing superior articles with indigenous materials and labour. I told them that I lamented the fact that I was obliged, entirely through their remissness, to purchase foreign goods."

"Did they agree with what you said?"

"They were quite ready to admit the justice of my remarks;

but they pleaded that there were insuperable difficulties in the way of turning out the better class of manufactures, chiefly the inferiority of material and the lack of skilled educated labour. I shall mention the subject again in the near future. I think that I might push things still further with effect, and advocate the refusal on the part of India to supply foreigners with any Indian product. Think where England would be without our cotton, our hides, our grain, our—our—”

“Leave out tobacco, my son. I have to look to the foreign markets for the disposal of three-quarters of my produce, and the foreigners are more prompt in their remittances than the chetties of India.”

Desika was slightly embarrassed for the moment, but he quickly recovered his self-sufficiency, and agreed with his father that it would not be convenient to include tobacco in the list.

“Perhaps on the whole it would be best to keep to broad lines, and, as I said before, not to enter into detail.”

The rest of the house was furnished in native fashion, but even there Sobraon Rao observed with silent amusement that some of the rugs were of the best Wilton pile, and the sheets and pillow-cases bore the unmistakable mark of the finest Irish workmanship.

Two days later the tobacco merchant journeyed southwards to visit Madura, and also Dindigul on business. At the end of a week he bent his steps towards the line of blue hills on the horizon where he knew that he should find his daughter.

It was fully two months since Rama Rajah had appeared before Dolores, and taken his own method of telling her of his calamity. The shock of his sudden advent had been too much for her. As he was in the act of lifting the unconscious form in his arms to carry her into the house, Veerama returned from the garden. In her alarm she plied him with questions but received no answer, a fact she ascribed to his absorption in Dolores, and perhaps to the contempt of the higher caste for the lower.

When Dolores regained her consciousness her first act was

to hold out her hand. It was taken by Veerama, but she was shaken off with gentle impatience. Rama Rajah, recognizing that the signal was for him, approached the sofa. He had known that this must come, and a sharp pain was at his heart as he thought of the dreaded explanation. The moment had arrived when it must be made ; this could not be done without the assistance of a third person. Between himself and Dolores there had always existed a confidence which had never been violated. There were moments in the past when he had poured into her ear confessions that were sacred to herself. She had sympathized and uttered words of counsel and comfort. That confidence, which was so sweet to both, was at an end. In the absence of Miss Beauchamp, Veerama would have to be the medium, and it was from Veerama that he shrank like a criminal instead of a victim.

"This—this calamity which has overtaken you, Rama Rajah," began Dolores. Then feeling the sudden twitching of his fingers, she paused as though to give him time to gather up his faltering courage. "It is some catastrophe, the cause of which I am utterly at a loss to guess. If you have any means of telling me, let me know the worst. I can bear it now."

He rose, and going to the window wrote some words upon the leaf of his notebook, which he handed to Veerama. She read them aloud, her voice almost failing her as she learned the truth.

"Dear Ranee, I have been very ill and am stricken dumb."

There was a pause, and then the voice of Dolores sounded clear and firm in the question she could no longer restrain.

"How did you lose your tongue?"

He did not reply immediately, but stood at the window gazing out upon the glory of the sunset with unseeing eyes. She waited patiently for the reply. It came at last, and Veerama read out—

"Through a surgical operation."

There was silence, and his eyes sought those of Veerama with an apprehensive gaze. He thought he saw her shrink away towards Dolores, and his heart sank. Too well he knew

how such calamities were regarded by the people of his nation. The pride of caste was humbled to the dust ; the despised Shanar girl, responding to her inherited instincts, turned with repulsion from the maimed Vellalan, in spite of the fact that he had done nothing to break his caste. The caste instinct was swallowed up in the animal instinct that has no toleration for imperfection. From Veerama his sad eyes went to the figure on the sofa. In that pale, sweet face shone a great pity—the pity an angel might wear. Veerama saw it too, and the sight of it shamed her and brought the blood to her cheeks with a flood of self-reproach.

“Rajah, come here !” cried Dolores. He was at her side in a moment. She laid her hand upon his bowed head as of old. “Listen !”

Words poured from her lips, the comforting words that rose straight from the heart of a loving sympathetic woman who knew how to console, who realized the extent of his suffering and suffered with him, and who could grasp the magnitude of his misfortune. Her whole soul went out in pity to the poor stricken man, breathing forth the pure love of a friend with that wealth of sympathy that is inherent in some womanly natures.

Veerama listened, a tumult of emotion stirring within her breast. Rama Rajah and Dolores were absorbed in each other and she was forgotten. As the words of healing fell on her ears, her Western teaching began to assert itself, and she contrasted her own attitude with that of Dolores. As she did so, the wave of shame surged back upon her with overwhelming force, and she turned aside to hide the hot tears that sprang into her eyes.

The loving words of the blind girl brought balm to the wounded spirit, and as he greedily drank them in, he more than once caught her hand to his lips and pressed it to his forehead after the manner of Hindus when deeply moved.

Later he departed. Then reaction overtook Dolores, and relief was found in tears.

“Oh ! my poor boy ! God help you to bear it ! God

help me to bear my share of your cross ! Can it be true that I shall never again hear your beloved voice ? It is impossible to believe it ! ”

The days passed and grew into weeks. During that time Dolores had many opportunities of strengthening the endurance and manly resignation of Rama Rajah. The black cloud that overshadowed his convalescence, charged with the spirit of revenge and retaliation, was dissipated ; and a light shone in upon him, bringing an oblivion of the past, which he fostered, at the prompting of Dolores, into something that approached the Christian spirit of forgiveness. No further allusion was made to the deed, and the gentle ladies of Mayflower House cultivated an atmosphere of cheerfulness which was not without its beneficial effect.

Perhaps if communication had been possible without the help of a third person, he might have been tempted to confide the true story of his misfortune to Dolores. There were times when he sat with her beneath the blue-gum in the silence he could not break, that he longed to lay his heart bare and tell her everything. But without assistance it was impossible. And it was well that she should not hear it. The details of that night of horror in the temple were not fit for her ears, and it was best that she should believe that his loss was the result of an inevitable operation.

Their means of converse were Miss Beauchamp and Veerama. The latter was more expert and quicker to comprehend than the older lady ; so it happened that Rama Rajah turned to Veerama for help more readily than to Miss Beauchamp and Mrs. Newent. At first conversation was carried on entirely by the aid of the notebook. Little by little Rama Rajah learned to make inarticulate sounds to which certain meanings were attached. It was slow work, and very different from the free and pleasant intercourse of the old days when he had lent the blind girl his eyes, and when her ears had listened delightedly to his musical tones, as he chatted or read or described the beauties of the scenery. It was as if a heavy curtain had fallen between them through which they groped blindly for each other.

Often, when Dolores was talking, Veerama caught the sad eyes of Rama Rajah fixed upon herself. At rare intervals the old aversion suddenly reappeared, mastering her completely for the moment, and causing her to beat a hasty retreat to her room. There reason came to her aid, and the mood ended in bitter self-reproach for her want of pity; after half an hour's communing with herself she returned to the two friends to find then sunk into stagnation or inexorable silence. With her advent the notebook came into use again and conversation revived.

As they sat beneath the Eucalyptus or within the violet scented drawing-room, Dolores frequently bade Veerama read to them, or Miss Beauchamp took up the book. Occasionally Veerama glanced up at the motionless figure seated near Dolores, and she usually found those melancholy eyes fixed upon herself. The thought behind them she could not fathom but of one thing she was sure; it was not pride of caste nor contempt for one who was not born within the pale of his own, birth. Then Dolores would stretch out her hand and touch that of Rama Rajah with some remark upon the tale to which they had been listening. As she spoke, Veerama watched the silent expressive face, noting the emotion that sprang into it. With surprising quickness she learned to read what was there. She also caught up some of the signs used by Jaganath. Under Mrs. Newent's instruction they practised finger reading, a means of communication impossible to Dolores. The pencil and notebook were required less frequently and conversation became less of an effort.

Gradually, but surely, the unreasonable feeling of aversion died away, never to return. The constant example of sweetness and loving consideration for his infirmity set by Dolores had its effect. And Rama Rajah's own patience and resignation, his uncomplaining acceptance of the conditions of his life, aroused her warm admiration. Then came pity, soft melting feminine pity trailing rosy clouds—not of glory but of love.

The time slipped away with seductive smoothness; Rama

Rajah lived with Jaganath in a tiny house not far from that which held his friends ; and scarcely a day passed without a visit, either in the breezy hours of the morning or in the warm afternoon. Mrs. Newent prepared to rejoin her husband at the end of September, but Dolores arranged to stay on longer, being unwilling to face an English winter at home ; so she explained the matter to herself and Mrs. Newent. But the prospect of parting with the friends she could never hope to see in England again, had more to do with her decision than she was aware.

The calm was suddenly broken by the arrival of Sobraon Rao. Without any previous notification of his intentions he was announced early one afternoon, when the four ladies were sitting together in the drawing-room after lunch. He greeted his daughter warmly and affectionately without a shadow of reproach for her flight, and Dolores' mind as well as Veerama's was set at rest at once. He talked easily and without constraint, telling them of his experiences in Egypt. In the middle of the conversation Rama Rajah was shown in. For the moment there was silence which was broken by Sobraon Rao himself, who said something to the new-comer in his own language. It was apparent that the tobacco merchant was not altogether ignorant of what had occurred. In another second the equilibrium of the little party was restored, and the general conversation which had been going on was resumed. Whilst they talked, Sobraon observed how his daughter interpreted when Rama Rajah wished to join in, how the sentences were given in the finger language, and how quick she was to understand the many little signs and semi-articulate whispers by which Rama Rajah expressed himself.

For fully an hour Sobraon Rao sat there, interested in the blind lady who had been so good a friend to his daughter. At the end of that time he asked if he might be permitted to take his leave, and again he addressed Rama Rajah in his own tongue. As he shook hands, he startled Dolores by asking if she could spare his daughter. The declaration of his wishes on this point was like a bomb-shell. He desired to take

Veerama back to Madura with him on the following day. Then, seeing the looks of consternation on their faces, he reassured them by saying that his wife was still in Bombay where she would remain, and that his house at Madura would be ruled for the present by his sister.

Veerama drew a sigh of relief, and the sudden cloud that had gathered, dispersed as rapidly as it had come. Ten minutes later Sobraon Rao left the house accompanied by Rama Rajah. Veerama retired to her room to put together her personal property, ready for the baggage cooly who would call early the next morning.

That evening Rama Rajah paid Dolores an unexpected visit. It so happened that she and Veerama were the only two at home, Mrs. Newent and Miss Beauchamp having gone to an entertainment at the Club. The interview was not of long duration.

"Ranee, I have come to tell you that Sobraon Rao has made me an offer. It is the agency at Cairo which, being largely desk work, I can easily manage with a proper staff of clerks."

"You will take it!" cried Dolores, a great gladness in her voice.

"There are difficulties; but I have considered them all."

"Your—your infirmity?"

"No, my caste."

He glanced at Veerama as he handed her the next leaflet from which she read—

"If I go to Egypt, I shall be obliged to sacrifice my caste, as I sacrificed it during my residence in England. But what will it matter? The evils that I have suffered here in my country make me welcome exile gladly. I turn my back upon my people without a single regret. And in exchange for my relatives the gods have given me friends who will be faithful to the end."

He clasped Dolores' hand, but his eyes sought eagerly those of Veerama.

"Rajah! I am so glad! The gulf between us will be bridged again!" cried the blind girl.

He gave her the details of the arrangement that had been made, which necessitated his departure for the plains on the following day. Presently he bade her good night, promising to look in for a few minutes on his way down the ghat. Then he took Veerama's hand in a silent farewell clasp. He made no attempt to thank her for her help in words, nor to speak of the future. But Dolores would have learned much could she have seen the look that shone in the eyes that were fastened upon those of the Shanar girl, pleading mutely for some great boon. The answer sprang in quick response, and he was satisfied. He passed from the room in the dawn of hope and happiness.

The new year brought a bright sun and clear sky to Southern India. But the brightness was not reflected in the hearts of Doraswamy and his family. Trouble had descended upon them like a black cloud, and grim death stalked uninvited in at the door of the smiling homestead in Tinnevelly. Lukshmi lay in deadly weakness upon her cot, neglected and unattended, whilst her mother-in-law and her women wept and wailed over the dead body of a lifeless grandson. With the death of the baby the light of life was extinguished for ever for the young mother. All her thoughts had been centred upon the child; without it the future was a dreary blank, a black world in which there was not a single ray of light. Her mother-in-law had never forgiven the part Lukshmi played in the accomplishment of the curse; but as long as there was a prospect of her bearing a son and heir to the house, the old lady was tolerant and sometimes kind. With the death of the child and the consequent disappointment she was soured, and her ill-humour was directed against her daughter-in-law. Then ensued one of those lamentable persecutions that are too common in the zenana, which render the persecutor and the persecuted miserable and the whole household unhappy. To add to Lukshmi's trouble, her mother-in-law, disappointed of marrying her son a second

Veerama back to Madura with him on the following day. Then, seeing the looks of consternation on their faces, he reassured them by saying that his wife was still in Bombay where she would remain, and that his house at Madura would be ruled for the present by his sister.

Veerama drew a sigh of relief, and the sudden cloud that had gathered, dispersed as rapidly as it had come. Ten minutes later Sobraon Rao left the house accompanied by Rama Rajah. Veerama retired to her room to put together her personal property, ready for the baggage cooly who would call early the next morning.

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time, arranged a marriage between her husband and Vencata's daughter, and the girl who should have been Doraswamy's daughter-in-law became his wife, a turn in fortune's wheel which was eminently satisfactory to that easy-going pleasure-loving individual. The latest addition to the zenana was petted and bullied in turn by Rama Rajah's mother, until the joyful news went through the family that there might be another son born to Doraswamy.

Lukshmi received the news in ominous silence. But no one took any notice of her, whether she screamed on the floor in passion or sulked in a corner of the kitchen. A few days later she was missing. Instinctively they ran to the well, that last resource of Indian womankind, and found her body in its depths.

With her death the atmosphere of the house cleared and grew bright again. The clouds that gather in the East may be black and heavy, but they disperse rapidly; and the tropical sun that follows sheds light and warmth with such a lavish hand as to obliterate the recollection of their blackness.

* * * * *

In Cairo may be seen, driving in a well-appointed carriage, a Hindu gentleman who is called "the silent man." He has never been known to speak to any one; and though he may smile now and then, his eyes have a sad expression which tell of some tragedy in his life. He is often accompanied by his wife, a gentle lady of his own nationality; and sometimes there is a third person in the carriage, a blind lady on whose face shines unmistakeable happiness.

Dolores and Miss Beauchamp usually spend the winter in Egypt at an hotel which is within easy reach of the luxurious home of their friends. Now and then Sobraon Rao pays Rama Rajah a flying visit. He is well satisfied with his choice of an agent for his Cairo house of business, and also with the manager. Jaganath did not reach his proud position all in a day, but worked his way up through the office until he became his cousin's right-hand man. As he threw in his lot with him when the stand was made against the guru, so he

decided to follow his cousin's fortunes to a foreign land where other things were of more consideration than caste.

There is one other matter in which Sobraon Rao finds still greater satisfaction than in the agency, and that is in the marriage which he made for his dearly loved daughter. It has been a complete success ; and both his wife and his son are also satisfied. Veerama's little sons will, by-and-by, be sent to England for their education, and they will eventually inherit half the wealth of their millionaire grandfather.

The other half will go to Desika, who still lives in Bombay, where he carries on his father's business with the keenness of a true merchant, and finds ample amusement and gratification in his platform triumphs. His fellow politicians have lately suggested that some sort of constitution, no matter how slight and sketchy, should be formed for the Congress. But Desika does not favour the movement. Possibly the reason for this may be found in the fact that he belongs to a low caste, and that there will be no place for him in its constitution. So he continues to fulminate against detail, and to implore United India to await with noble magnanimity the moment when the alien oppressor will see the iniquity of his misrule, and will offer the hoary empire of the East the boon she craves of self-government.

THE END.



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